

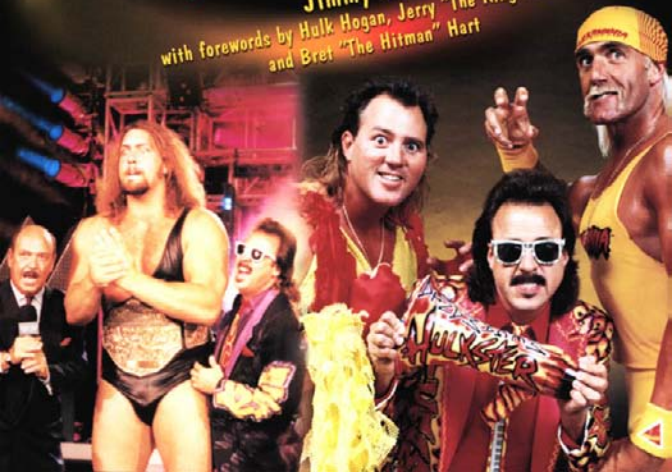


# The Mouth of the South

THE JIMMY HART STORY

Jimmy Hart

with forewords by Hulk Hogan, Jerry "The King" Lawler  
and Bret "The Hitman" Hart









# **The Mouth of the South**

**THE JIMMY HART STORY**

**JIMMY HART**

**ECW Press**



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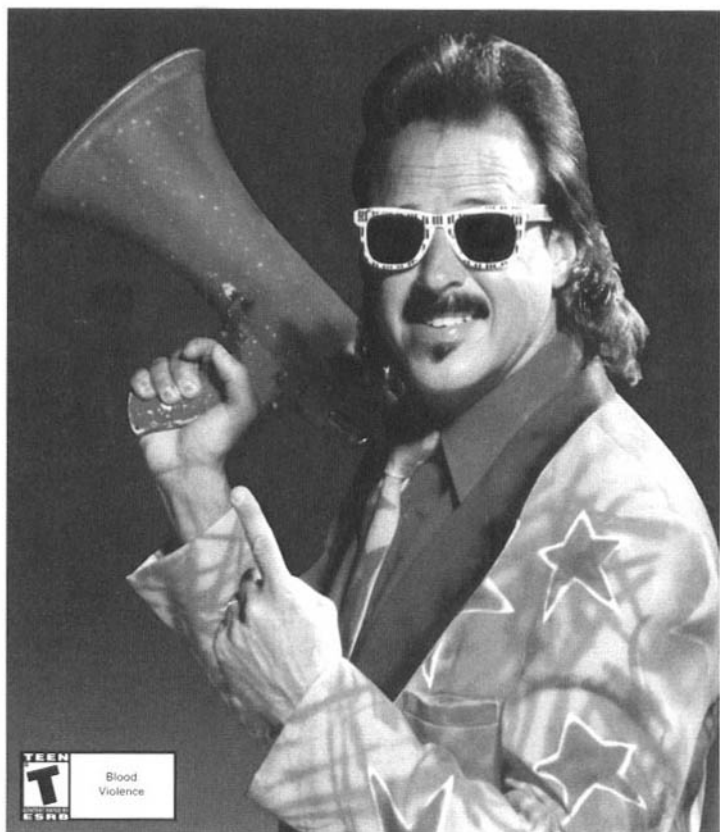
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**"MOUTH OF  
THE SOUTH"  
JIMMY HART**

**LEGENDS  
OF  
WRESTLING**



Foreword

Foreword

# Forewords

## "The Mouth of the South"

Jimmy Hart?

He's a loyal friend, true professional and one of the last reasons to believe the art form of professional wrestling might survive.

Because he still cares, he makes me feel all my years of being on the road, the chances I took, my blood and sweat, the way I've destroyed my body, really has made a difference. Whenever I was fed up or just tired of the low road the business always took, Jimmy was there for me. He always made me look on the positive side. Whenever I was going through one of my mood swings, or just in a negative mood, Jimmy would say, "Damn it, you're Hulk Hogan — put a smile on your face." It always worked. Jimmy Hart made me realize, even when the promoters tired to destroy the Hulkster character, that a promoter could not destroy the loyal Hulkamaniacs, or stop them from cheering



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louder for me than for anyone else in the business.

Pro wrestling needs Jimmy Hart. Jimmy is one of the only guys left who still listens with his heart. He has more money-making ideas, and knows more about the way to make things work, than any 10 creative teams put together.

I find it hard to watch wrestling these days. The storylines are horrible and the stuff shot backstage looks like a bad “Jerry Springer Show” episode. The wrestlers don’t know how to carry the ball and act like robots. . . The boys don’t even understand what the fans want and need.

If the WWE is the Alamo of “Sports Entertainment,” then Vince [McMahon], you need Jimmy.

It was fun,

— Hulk Hogan

In 1966 I was a Junior at Treadwell High School in Memphis, Tennessee. On Saturday mornings I’d watch the local wrestling show on WHBQ television and then go out into my backyard with my next door neighbor and pretend to be Jackie Fargo or the Blue Infernos. But on the evenings that my parents would go visit their friends, I’d go into their room, turn up the radio full blast, and with a broom as my guitar, I’d stand in front of their full length mirror and pretend to be Jimmy Hart! That’s right, Jimmy Hart was already a major star before I even graduated from high school. As the lead singer for a local garage band called the Gentrys, Jimmy and his fellow musicians had a huge song in the mid ’60s called “Keep on Dancing.” In an era when the Top Ten hit lists were dominated by the Beatles, I, like everyone else, was amazed to see a band, not only from



Memphis, but from my very own high school, knock the Fab Four off the charts. Jimmy graduated from Treadwell a few years before I did, so I never met him in school. I only saw him on television, heard him on the radio, or bought his records. It was nearly ten years later that our paths actually crossed. I'd love to tell that story and about a million others that I know about Jimmy, but this is his book, so I'll let him do that. I've often heard the saying that it's better to be lucky than to be good, and that has really applied to my career. Over the years, I have either been in the right place at the right time, or had the good fortune to meet the right people. One lucky day for me was when I met Jimmy Hart at Ardent recording studio in Memphis. And the rest, as they say, is history. I can't tell you how much Jimmy, and his voice, which I liken to fingernails being dragged across a chalkboard, have added to my success, not to mention the success of countless other wrestlers he managed. "The Mouth of the South" has had a fascinating life and career, and I'm sure you will enjoy his recollections of them . . . I know I will.

— Jerry "The King" Lawler

Throughout my entire career I had but one wrestling manager. I've always been proud of the enthusiasm and integrity associated with Jimmy Hart and my early Hart Foundation days. Jimmy Hart encouraged me to believe in myself. He was a professional from start to finish. And, above all other things, he was always a true friend.

— Bret Hart







# Something to Talk About

Monday morning, November 20, 2000. I leave my home in Tampa, Florida, and catch an early plane to Augusta, Georgia, where World Championship Wrestling is running a show. In some ways, it's the same thing I've been doing for the past 20-plus years — leaving my family at home for a few days of non-stop action. All to give professional wrestling fans something to talk about. I'm traveling by plane, and WCW will have a nice new rental car for me and a room of my own at the Hilton or the Marriott. Things certainly have changed since my early days in Memphis Wrestling. Back then, I'd find myself crammed into some beaten contraption with at least three other wrestlers, everyone chipping in for enough gas to cover the four- or five-hour drive. When it was all said and done we'd check into a Red Roof Inn or a Days Inn, often sharing rooms, or having somebody "heel in," to save a few



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bucks. Today I'll get to the Richmond County Civic Center before noon and start getting ready for tonight's show. In the old days we'd arrive at a local high school gym no more than an hour-and-a-half before match time. Still, it's basically the same routine — a lot of hard work to give the people what they want.

And what the people want is to see Jimmy Hart, "The Mouth of the South," the World's Greatest Wrestling Manager, the former Southern Handicap Champion, get his butt kicked. That much hasn't changed a bit. I won the first match I ever wrestled in, back in 1978, when Jerry "The King" Lawler stood in my corner and helped me beat a Memphis "jobber" (a wrestler who seems like he was born just to lose wrestling matches) named Pat Hutchinson. As a grappler, I can count on one hand the matches I've won since. As a manager, though, I've been on the winning side with some of the greatest names in professional wrestling — Lawler, Bret Hart, the Honky Tonk Man, the Rougeau Brothers, Hulk Hogan . . . the list goes on and on. And it backs up my claim: I really am the greatest manager in the history of professional wrestling. I even made a winner out of a wimpy comedian named Andy Kaufman.

But tonight I'm on my own, and I have a chance to win one of my first matches in more than 20 years. I'm wrestling a woman from Augusta — not a woman wrestler but a woman deejay — named Montana Taylor.

Maybe Andy Kaufman really was that far ahead of his time. In the beginning, Andy would only wrestle women. He was the Inter-Gender Champion (like me, he invented his own championship) when he came to Memphis in 1982 and learned about the real world of professional wrestling from Jerry Lawler and Jimmy Hart. "The King" taught Andy how dangerous



professional wrestling can be by jamming his head into the mat with a couple of piledrivers — a move so dangerous that Memphis Wrestling, at the time, had banned its use. I taught Andy how to break the rules without getting caught, the proper way to gang up on someone and the fine art of the double-cross — how to distract your opponent while your partner attacks him from behind, how to do anything and everything you can, inside and outside the ring, to get your revenge. The only thing neither one of us could ever teach the Hollywood star was how to pick up the check in a restaurant.

Andy's legendary, if brief, wrestling career has become well documented by biographers, commentators and filmmakers. At the time, however, the only Kaufman matches that aired on TV were local Saturday morning "promos" — brief spots to build up "heat" or controversy for the regular Monday night wrestling card at the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis or other matches scheduled for later that week in the Mid-South region. It all occurred during the days of the "territories," as the regional independent wrestling organizations were called, and wrestling has certainly evolved since. What was once a weekly regional TV show, staged in front of a couple hundred faithful at a local station studio, has grown into a nationally televised extravaganza. Wrestling stars are as popular across the nation as the athletes in any other sport. But tonight, it looks like we've come full-circle, back to Andy Kaufman and the local angle, because the opening match, which will take place before the show goes on the air to a national audience, features a wimpy man — me — fighting a non-professional woman.

As usual, I have no one to blame but myself — my mouth, really — for getting me into this. A few months back, I was



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visiting a radio station in Chicago, doing some advance promotion for an upcoming pay-per-view wrestling show. One of Chicago's top radio personalities, a guy named Mancow (the host of "Mancow's Morning Madness" and a regular on the Fox News TV network) was interviewing me, and he attacked my ability as a manager. I told him how I thought radio personalities these days were cowards, making fun of everybody who actually works for a living while they hide behind a microphone. One thing led to another, and we got into a scuffle right there on the air and decided to settle the feud in the ring. Now it seems that no matter where World Championship Wrestling goes, the local deejay wants a piece of Jimmy Hart.

After more than 20 years, I know every trick in the book, so this match should be a piece of cake, right? I've gotten out of jams with the help of canes, chains, megaphones and any other "foreign object" I could find. I was once caught between a rock and hard place, forced to choose loyalties between a guy I was managing by the name of Terry Boulder (soon to be Hulk Hogan), and a guy I was working for named Jerry "The King" Lawler, and I came out without a scratch. On another occasion, when I was leaving Memphis for New York, I arranged for a wrestler to represent me in the ring in a loser-leave-town match, while a Jimmy Hart look-alike hovered ringside in case somebody wanted to come after me personally. So, I'm as good at getting out of trouble as I am getting into it.

Well, almost. I've taken my "bumps" (wrestling lingo for getting clotheslined, dropkicked, piledriven and body slammed), and I've also been "busted wide open," as the announcers like to say whenever somebody's head starts bleeding. I've had my jaw broken, I've had my face and hair



burned and my elbow still juts out from a break that didn't heal right — all from working with professional wrestlers who knew what they were doing. I'm always apprehensive about wrestling an outsider, even if it is a woman.

Tonight's match would have never happened in the old days, of course, because we would never have let an outsider into the ring. Professional wrestling was a closed-mouth fraternity. Just a few years ago, no deejay would have been let in on any part of the business (except for guys like Bubba the Love Sponge, a Tampa deejay who had done some small-time professional wrestling before he became a deejay). No newspaper columns or Internet websites would be talking about "storylines" or contracts or wrestlers' real names. And I probably wouldn't be writing this chapter, or even this book. But whether it's veiled in secrecy or transparent "sports entertainment," professional wrestling will always be about selling tickets, and tonight putting me up against a local deejay is good for business. It gets us local publicity, obviously, but it also plays an important part in the production of "Monday Night Nitro," even though it won't be part of the telecast.

My match with Montana will start about 15 minutes before the show's 7 o'clock air time, partly because she's a local deejay and not a nationally known personality, but mostly because this is a sure way to get all the seats filled by the time we do go on the air. A lot of people, especially in the South, are used to wrestling matches starting at 8 p.m. But these days we put on a two-hour live "Nitro" and then tape a two-hour "Thunder" (which airs on Thursdays) all on the same evening. If we started things any later, people would be in their seats well past midnight — and with work or school just a few hours away,



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that's not a good idea. So we have to get things going early. But of course that leads to other conflicts — people barely have time to go home after work, grab a quick bite, round up the kids and get to the match on time. They could come late and still see plenty of wrestling, but if they're not there, in their seats, 15 minutes before the matches start, they're going to miss seeing their local deejay square off against Jimmy Hart. In a lot of towns, people would come out just for the chance to see what their local deejay, who they usually only hear, looks like. On top of that, they're going to watch a local hero try to make "The Mouth of the South" eat his words. For WCW, this kind of thing ensures there are no empty seats when "Nitro" goes live.

So I need to be there about an hour ahead of time to get dressed, right? Sure, if this was Memphis Wrestling in the early 1980s. When the matches started at 8, we'd get there about 6:30 or quarter-to-seven. Somebody would come to the "back" (the dressing room) with a piece of paper and say, "All right, this is the order. We need to get at least 10 or 15 minutes out of you guys tonight. And 20 to 25 from the main event." And so on and so on it went through the card. And that would be it.

That worked okay with a dozen wrestlers, a small regional territory and a couple of running feuds between the "babyfaces" (the good guys) and the "heels" (the bad guys). It wouldn't work now, though. Today, with a four-hour-plus show, 40 or more wrestlers and a worldwide TV audience with millions of advertising dollars riding on each tenth of a rating point, everything begins earlier in the day — about eight hours earlier.

My first responsibility on a day like today is the creative meeting, and that usually begins at 10 a.m. At that meeting the



creative team plans things that just a couple of years ago, we'd sooner die than reveal. A lot of what goes on behind the scenes in professional wrestling has been exposed now, and in a way, it's been good for the fans to find out how much hardship, stress and physical pain professional wrestlers really go through. But in another way, it's not good for wrestling — in the same way that it's not good for a magician to reveal his secrets. And I think a lot of fans really don't want to know about creative meetings and storylines and the business end of the pro game. For every fan who's fascinated when our secrets are revealed, there's someone else who mourns the loss of its magic.

The challenge for the creative team seems simple: make sure the TV audience doesn't change the channel. But we're talking cable and satellites now, and people have 100 or 150 stations to choose from. If something comes on that they really don't want to see — whether it's football, baseball, wrestling, boxing or their favorite sitcom — they've got that little magic button in their hand, and they can click over to any other part of the world in a heartbeat. So even if a wrestling match is competitive and creative, if the people don't recognize the stars or if the wrestlers aren't truly impressive, then they're going to move to another channel. Think of it this way: if you're a network TV programming executive and you can air either a close, competitive ballgame between the Kansas City Royals and the Minnesota Twins, or you can get the Yankees versus the Mets, the choice is obvious. It's the same thing when you're dealing with professional wrestling — except that you also have to create the whole idea — their character, charisma and status — of the Yankees and the Mets before you match them up.



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The production — the look of the show — is just as important as what goes on in the ring. Again, it's no different from other TV sports — like “Monday Night Football,” where half the show is splashy graphics and replays and interviews. WCW’s “Monday Night Nitro” is an arena event — a huge production with stage sets and sound and lights. It's bigger, longer and more complicated than most rock concerts. And there are stories that the fans want to follow from one show to the next. So no matter how great the wrestlers and the match-ups are, if the show itself is not just as impressive, people are going to change the channel. That's why the production team is also brought into the creative meeting.

Some people would be surprised to find out how much is not worked out in the creative meeting. The goal of the creative team is to try to give all the wrestlers a chance to tell their stories and perform at their best. And no matter what might be written down on paper, some guys can do what you ask them, and some guys, simply, can't. I found that out the hard way years ago in Louisville, Kentucky, when we let a “wannabe” wrestler, a black guy we called Snowman, work a match as my bodyguard.

Lawler had helped him out a little, training him to wrestle, but was on the verge of giving up, unsure if the guy had what it takes. Snowman was persistent, however, hanging around the TV station where we did our Saturday show. I remember that he was always asking me to put in a good word for him with Lawler: “Get me in, Jimmy, get me in.” Eventually, the day came when one of our scheduled workers was a no-show, and I convinced Lawler to let Snowman be my bodyguard. The guy was actually pretty good on the mic, plus he looked imposing. More to the point, he really was strong as hell. A true monster.



Anyway, we finally took Snowman up to Louisville, where he was going to take part in a match with me against Lawler and Rick Rude. Before the show I asked “The King” if he wanted me to tell Snowman what he was supposed to do.

“Oh, don’t even worry about it,” Lawler said, “I’ll call it in the ring. Just make sure he knows I don’t want anybody getting near you until the end of the match.”

So that’s just what I told the guy. “Snowman, no matter what happens, don’t let anybody get near me until the end of the match. Remember, keep them away until Lawler says it’s okay.”

Simple, right? But Snowman only got half of it — the keep-them-away-from-me part. At one point in the match I got into trouble, and he jumped in and threw Lawler out of the ring. Next, Rude attacked — and he threw Rick out of the ring as well. From then on he just kept swinging away, wildly, “protecting” me. The fans were going berserk, and Lawler was standing on the floor screaming, “What in the hell? Jimmy, he won’t let us in the ring!”

And that’s when I said, “I told you you should have talked the match over with him! You said, ‘Nobody touches Jimmy Hart.’ So now that’s what he believes.”

Believe it or not, Snowman kept Lawler and Rude from re-entering the ring. And that’s the way the match ended. At that time “The King” was the babyface, and the crowd had come out to see him beat up on Jimmy Hart; but thanks to Snowman, the fans — in Lawler’s mind, anyway — did not get to go home happy. And that’s bad for business on any night. Lawler was afraid Snowman had not only ruined the match, but that he also might have ruined the town for future matches. It’s funny now, to think that we got into such a mess because



## The Mouth of the South

one of our own wrestlers thought everything was real. The lesson? You have to know your employees' limitations as well as their strengths.

The creative meeting lasts about an hour, and from there we start working with the "agents" to get everything ready for the actual matches. The agents are essentially production people, some of them ex-wrestlers, who take the plans from the creative meeting and make the matches happen. If it's a "hardcore" match, for example, where anything goes, it's going to take place in the back as well as in the ring, and the agent will have to work out things with the guys in the prop truck. Whatever "weapons" will be used have to be unloaded and strategically placed. We take our own garbage cans, broom handles and everything else on the road with us. You can't just get them from the arenas because they don't normally supply all that stuff, and if they did, they'd probably charge us \$40 for a garbage can that cost \$10. So the agents get with the wrestlers and do everything necessary to make the matches work.

The "boys" — the wrestlers — get there an hour after we do. If we're there at 10:00 they get there at 11:00. If we're there at 12:00, they're there at 1:00. Still, they have their own long pre-show routines: everything from pre-taping spots for different parts of the program, visiting the trainer and working on their costume with the seamstress.

Yes, I said trainer and seamstress. We have a trainer who goes everywhere with us. In the old days, you had nothing. You were lucky if the building had a box of Band-Aids. When I had a cut that needed medical attention, one of the wrestlers would stitch me up. Now, if anybody gets busted open or hurt, you have medical care right there.



We need a trainer now more than ever. Even though the wrestlers are in better shape and spend more time in the gym than they used to, there are more injuries. Today's combatants are doing more athletic, more death-defying moves than ever before. The shows are bigger and there's more at stake. It's like anything else. The more spectacular the move, the higher the spot, the better the "pop" or crowd reaction. And the more pops you get, the more the people in the back think you're really "going over" — entertaining or becoming popular — with the crowd. The guys who get the biggest and best pops, who are the most popular with the people, are going to be the stars — and they're going to make the most money. That's why they try to outdo each other. When you see a guy now who weighs 225 pounds diving over the top rope onto a table, or doing a " moonsault " off the top rope and landing a half-gainer on top of somebody, you're going to see more injuries.

We also have a full-time seamstress on the road with us, so if the guys want different outfits made or designed she can do that right on the spot. I've never underestimated the importance of having your own "look." Back when I had the Hart Foundation, managing Bret Hart and Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart, we were one of the top heel teams in the World Wrestling Federation. Bret decided he'd start wearing wrestling tights with the basic color of pink. I can't say for sure that the pink tights made all the difference, but Bret thinks they did. As soon as he started wearing pink, he started going over so well that Vince McMahon, the head of the WWF, eventually turned Bret babyface. And that meant Jimmy Hart couldn't manage him any longer. Of course, I got my revenge on him as the manager of other tag teams — but that's another story.



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Coming from the world of rock and roll, I was always aware of the importance of your image. When I started with Memphis Wrestling, I bought a flashy jacket and a bunch of appliqués shaped like musical notes, to tie in with my former occupation as a member of the Gentrys. I put the notes on the jacket myself. Later on in Memphis I dressed in formal white tails and carried a cane, but it wasn't an ordinary cane. I'd buy a roll of red ribbon and wrap the cane so it looked like a barber's pole. And when I got to New York, I had jackets custom-made with big airbrushed paint jobs. We didn't have a props department or a wardrobe department, but it was worth spending my own money and my own time to make sure the people noticed Jimmy Hart.

Today, it's more difficult for a wrestler to stand out. A lot of them come into the ring with the same kind of haircut that people in the audience would have, or the same kind of outfit that people in the audience are wearing, so they don't look any different from the crowd. If you don't stand out, you're not noticed, and if you're not noticed, you're going to have a hard time making money as any kind of entertainer. But with a seamstress and a props department at their disposal, at least the wrestlers today are getting all the help the organization can give them.

On a normal day, I'd go from the creative meeting to the food table. We used to think the promoters were taking good care of us if there was a water fountain in the dressing area. Now there's a huge buffet set up in a separate room, usually with roast beef, potatoes, a couple of kinds of beans, corn, plus all kinds of soft drinks, fruit juices, coffee and bottled water. Our caterers take care of the road crew as well as the staff and



the wrestlers, so there's a breakfast laid out, too, if you're there early enough. Today, though, I'm skipping the food table so I can get to work on my match.

I'm essentially my own agent. They let me handle everything myself. At the creative meeting, all they said was, "Don't forget, tonight Jimmy will have a match before we go live on the air." I learned a long time ago that taking care of your own business, and having a little checklist of everything you want done, is better than having to rely on somebody else who's got 20 other things to do that day. Everybody's so busy, putting on a show on with 11 or 12 matches, that the last thing they need to worry about is Jimmy Hart's bout with the local deejay.

To make sure my match is going to go over, I head straight from the creative meeting to the local radio station for a publicity spot — a weigh-in with Montana Taylor. This gives me a chance to promote the whole wrestling card. We couldn't build up the matches any better if we paid for all the airtime that we're going to get. Montana's show airs from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., so we do a weigh-in live on radio. The station's afternoon deejay is going to be in her corner tonight, so he's also there at the studio and he's going to be talking about it on his show, too. Our weigh-in is supposed to be just like a boxing weigh-in, except Montana doesn't want to get on the scales. She's a former Miss Something or Other, so maybe she's embarrassed. Of course, when she finally does step on the scales, I put my foot on the corner of the plate and kick her up to about 250 pounds.

Even a short radio appearance like this one takes a good bit of planning between WCW and the people at the station. I also have to make sure everybody knows the stipulations of the



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match. And that they've signed the release that says if they do get hurt in the ring with me, they're not going to sue me or the company. I have to get the music from the radio station that'll be used for our entrances to the ring and make sure it's been cleared for public performance. And I have to get with David Pinzer, our announcer, so he'll have the names and the radio station's call letters and all the right information for the match.

Along with everything else, I have to make sure I've put the match together well enough that everybody leaves with a great taste in their mouth. The next day we'll get a ton of publicity from what happened in the ring. If the deejays have a positive experience, then "The Mouth of the South" will always be able to come back into that city and do stuff with them — promoting wrestling shows, albums, books, anything.

By the time I get back to the building for the event, it's time to get dressed. In the days of the territories, you were lucky if there were two dressing rooms. A lot of times there was just one, with the babyfaces on one side and the heels on the other. Now, the bigger stars, like Hogan or Goldberg or Triple H, have their own dressing rooms, although they're nice enough that they usually let their friends dress there, too. It's only the "underneath" guys, wrestlers just getting started, who are dressing 10 or 12 to a room.

I dress in the booking room. The "booker" would probably be called the creative director in any other business. The booking room is central headquarters for the matches. We have a fax machine and four phones, and there's usually somebody from the booking committee there. My match will be over by the time the show goes on the air, but my job will just be beginning.



After my match I'll be working in the back, doing whatever it takes to get the wrestlers ready to go through the tunnel out into the arena on time. Usually three or four of us from the creative staff man the booking room so if anybody has a problem they can find us easily.

I'm debuting a new look tonight. My new outfit, designed especially for when I wrestle deejays, is a hockey jersey with my face on the front, along with "Jimmy Hart, Mouth of the South." On the back it says, "Stand up or shut up." I'll be wearing that over a pair of black sweatpants, plus tennis shoes and kneepads that match the red, black and white color scheme of the jersey.

When we're finally in the middle of the squared circle, Montana Taylor, of course, is the crowd favorite. A lot of deejays are more popular in their hometowns than some of the wrestlers, and the people of Augusta, Georgia, have come out to support Montana. She looks like she's dressed more for a rodeo than a wrestling match, with leather pants and some sort of fringed top, for a Western or Indian effect. She has her fellow deejay in her corner, so I have one of our wrestlers, Shannon Moore, from Three-Count, in mine.

Sure, many of today's wrestling fans are "smart" — they understand wrestling as "sports entertainment." They've read in the paper or newsletters on the Internet about storylines, about the buildup and plot and arc of the feuds. But if they think every little thing that goes on in the ring is planned or choreographed, they're wrong. If they think Jimmy Hart and Montana got together and worked out a bunch of moves, they're wrong. We were so rushed, getting around town for the promotion, and then getting back to the arena and dressed for



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the match, that by the time the bell rings it's "What you see is what you get."

Montana might not have had any professional wrestling experience, but I'll give her credit — she must have studied some of my old matches. I'm not even sure Charles Robinson, the referee, had even given the signal to ring the bell to start before she ran across the ring and jumped on my back. Now, she's pounding me for all she's worth. About this time, I'm wondering if maybe she's still mad about me putting my foot on the scales during the weigh-in. Sure, wrestlers are expected to say and do a lot of insulting things to each other, but sometimes, if it gets too personal, a match can turn into a "shoot," which means everything is for real.

I start feeling better about things when I flip Montana off of my back, but I'm still down on the mat. Fortunately, Moore, the wrestler in my corner, is a student of the Jimmy Hart School of Wrestling Management, and he jumps up on the ring apron to distract Montana — something I've done hundreds of times in my career to give my wrestler time to recover. When my guy from Three-Count jumps up, Montana goes after him. Now, with her looking the other way, I come up behind her and grab her hair. I'm getting ready to hit her, but before I can, the other deejay in her corner jumps up on the ring apron. I don't want him in the ring, so I let her loose and go across the ring to take care of him, which turns out to be a mistake. Montana comes up behind me and gives me a shot to the crotch. As I collapse onto the mat, I am now sure that I never should have said anything about her weight. She jumps on top of me for a pin attempt, and the referee, Charles Robinson, dives down to count. But Shannon Moore grabs the referee and



pulls him out of the ring. I grab Montana, and once again I'm about to hit her, but her deejay friend jumps into the ring and nails me with a chair.

The crowd loves it. And that's why, after 20 years, I'm still here. The "pops" are great, but my real reward will come tomorrow, or next week, or somewhere down the road, when a wrestling fan will recognize me and want to talk about the night I wrestled a woman deejay in Augusta, Georgia. Or maybe about a match I had in Madison Square Garden or some big European arena, managing the Honky Tonk Man or the Hart Foundation. Or they might have seen me playing the part of Jammin' Jimmy on Hulk Hogan's TV series. Or they were there at the Mid-South Coliseum the night Jerry Lawler sang with the Gentrys and got smashed over the head with a guitar.

I've given the people a lot to talk about, through my music as well as my wrestling career, but for now, I'll do the talking. They don't call me "The Mouth of the South" for nothing.





THE GENTRYS



# The Gentrys

## Rockin' in Memphis

Wrestling fans always approach me with the same two questions.

The first, of course, is “How did Jimmy Hart get into professional wrestling?” I’m grateful that folks care enough to ask. And over the years I’ve tried to find a reasonable, succinct explanation. But the truth, as they say, is a long story; it’s also one of the reasons I’m writing this book.

But I know it’s their other question that they really want answered. “How,” they want to know, “can I get into professional wrestling?” Well, the best advice I have can be summed up in seven little words: Don’t do it the way I did. You might end up a rock star, or you might end up a musician in a hotel lounge band. I did both of those things, but I had no idea that I’d ever be involved in professional wrestling as anything more than a fan.



## The Mouth of the South

I've always been a fan. I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, loving professional wrestling. As a kid I couldn't get enough of Sputnik Monroe, Billy Wicks, Tojo Yammamoto and Jackie Fargo. And when I'd go to Florida, I'd always watch Dusty Rhodes, Cowboy Bill Watts, people like that.

I loved wrestling. You gotta love wrestling. But my love of wrestling was not what allowed me to step between the ropes.

It was music, of all things, that got me into wrestling, and music has always been an important part of my in-ring career.

I got into music because of my mother, Sadie Hart. She wrote songs and sang and worked a nine-to-five gig, but dreamed of stardom like everyone else. Years ago, back in Jackson, Mississippi, where we lived for the first few years of my life, she penned a tune she was sure was something special. She was able to get in touch with Colonel Tom Parker, who would later be Elvis's manager but who at that time was managing Eddy Arnold. This was in the late '40s, when Eddy Arnold was one of the biggest stars in the industry — not just country music. He was a true crossover star, someone who had #1 records on the pop charts as well as the country charts.

My mother and Colonel Parker met in a hotel. He said, "Well, you said you had a song." And she did, playing it for him on a piano in the lobby. He said, "If you make a demo and send it to me, Eddy Arnold will cut it."

She did, and he did. The song was "Enclosed One Broken Heart," and Eddy Arnold took it to #6 on the Billboard country charts in 1950. Sadie Hart only had that one hit, but she kept on writing songs and chasing the dream for the rest of her life.

So when I came along and showed a little musical talent, my mother, naturally, encouraged me to sing, too. I was born



in Jackson, but my mother didn't want me to grow up on a farm, or go on to sell moonshine, so she and my father divorced when I was about 18 months old. From then on she raised me by herself. We eventually landed in Memphis when I was seven or eight, and she got a job with the state.

The truth is, I hated singing — but she forced me to keep at it. I was always a part of the church choir, performing at all kinds of benefits. And later I found myself in the high school chorus. When the Grand Ole Opry would bring a show to Memphis, they'd always have a little local performer on the show, and I was always the little local performer.

“And now, here's Little Jimmy Hart!”

I'd go up and sing “Sixteen Tons,” and I'd get to meet the Eddy Arnolds, the Red Foleys and the big Opry stars of that time.

Of course the biggest name in Memphis — or anywhere else — was Elvis Presley. And the biggest moment of my young singing career was meeting Elvis. It happened at the old Ellis Auditorium in Memphis when I was about 11 years old. My mother had gone down to the auditorium to meet with Colonel Parker and Eddy Arnold. We were back stage when all of a sudden Elvis shows up. My mother wore these big old floppy earrings, and I'll always remember what Elvis said to her: “I have a pair of cufflinks just like them.”

I never actually met Elvis again, but in a way our paths would cross again years later when I worked with Sam Phillips and recorded for Sun Records. As everybody knows, Sam discovered Elvis and put out Elvis's first records on the Sun label.

At Treadwell High School, I was more interested in sports than music. I played wingback on the football team, and during my senior year I was seventh in the city in pass receptions. One



## The Mouth of the South

day a friend named Larry Raspberry gave me a call. Some of the guys had put a band together called the Gents, and they were looking for a singer. They were making ten or fifteen bucks a night playing small, local gigs — at the YMCA, some little house parties around the city and at birthday parties, that kind of thing — and were trying to pick up a few college gigs here and there. Larry asked me if I wanted to audition. Our football season was almost over, so after practice one day, I went over and sang a few bars of “Louie, Louie” or something. Whatever it was, I was hired.

The Gents featured three lead singers: me, Larry Raspberry (who also played guitar) and Bruce Bowles. Our rhythm section featured Pat Neal on bass and Larry Wall on the drums. Bobby Fisher played sax.

The “Gents” is not a typo. That was our original name — short for Gentlemen — but a guy who was booking and promoting our shows at the time didn’t like it. He had been telling us, “You know, there’s so many people coming out, like the Beatles and the Beau Brummels. ‘The Gents’ just doesn’t ring. People say, ‘Who’s coming?’ You say, ‘The Gents.’ It just doesn’t sound right.”

Our main gig was playing every weekend at the T. Walker Lewis YMCA, and one afternoon we were on our way to the YMCA to play in a little battle-of-the-bands competition. Back then our rival bands were Tommy Burke and the Counts and another group called the Church Keys. We were thinking about what our booker had said about the “The Gents” not having any appeal. Maybe he was right. On the way to the gig we stopped at a service station to get gas. We walked into the men’s restroom, and in there was a rubber machine. And believe it or



not, one of the rubbers was called was the Gentry. We coughed up the money and bought a pack, and from that day on we were called the Gentrys. When we called our booker and told him about the new name, he said, "That's it! I love it!" He never knew where it came from.

Treadwell High School had an annual talent contest, and the winner would get the chance to go to the Memphis State Fair. Each year the fair would audition acts from different schools, and three groups — one in music, one in dancing and one in acrobatics or whatever — ultimately got to appear on "Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour," which was a big TV show. We won in the musical division, so we got to go to Miami Beach to compete in the first round of the "Amateur Hour's" own competition. I'll never forget seeing the June Taylor Dancers, who were featured on Jackie Gleason's weekly TV show — it really was a thrill for a bunch of kids from Memphis, Tennessee.

We sang a song called "Do You Love Me," which had been a hit for the Contours, and two weeks later we got the word that we had won the round. Three months after that we went to New York City for the second round, and we won again. Then, while we were waiting for the third and final round, things started happening for us in Memphis, and we put out a record. So when we got back to New York for the third round, the Ted Mack people said, "We hear y'all have a record deal."

Well, that made us professionals, so we were disqualified. But they were nice enough to let us appear on the show anyway. The guy who "beat" us played the spoons — and he actually dropped them in the middle of his act. They told us "You guys got the most votes, but ..."



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We didn't care. We had a record deal. It came about through George Klein, who, as every Elvis fan knows, was the best man at Elvis's wedding and a member of Elvis's "Memphis Mafia." Around Memphis, though, everybody simply knew him as a deejay on WHBQ, the big Top 40 AM radio station. Klein also had a local TV show called "Talent Party" that aired at five o'clock on Saturday afternoons. It was on for an hour. Being a deejay, he had access to any of the groups that came through town because everybody wanted to be on his TV show. We met him on one of our dates at the T. Walker Lewis YMCA. He told us that a good friend of his named Chips Moman had just come back into town. Chips had written the song "This Time," which was a #6 pop hit for Troy Shondell in 1961, and had just opened Memphis' newest recording studio, a place called American Studios. Because we had a little following by then, George Klein said, "Why don't y'all go over and meet with him. It won't cost you anything. Maybe he can cut a demo on you. If you do, I'll put you on the show."

So we went over and met with Chips. He had a song called "Sometimes," a very slow song, and we went over and cut it with him. Then we did it on Klein's show, and the phone started ringing off the wall. So Chips put up his own money and released our version of "Sometimes" as a single.

Back in the mid-sixties, radio stations were more independent than they are now. They'd play records by local and regional bands. You could call in, and they took requests. There was a guy on a radio station in Memphis named Roy Mack, and one night he said, "Tonight we're gonna debut a record by a group from Treadwell High School called the Gentrys. The record's called 'Sometimes.'" As soon as it played, right off the bat, it



became the station's most requested song. Every morning we'd wake up and go to school with the radio telling us, "And now, the Number One requested song from last night . . . Sometimes I cry when I'm lonely . . ."

The record started selling real well around town, so Chips Moman called MGM Records. The guy at MGM said, "Well, it could be a fluke hit because the kids are from Memphis. Why don't you let them cut something a little more up tempo, and check back with us?" So we went back into the studio with Chips.

We had met a group in Memphis called the Avantes, and they had a song called "Keep on Dancing." They performed it real slow, with a shuffle beat. We took the song and sped it up and put in a quick drum roll. We wanted to cut "Keep on Dancing," but Chips wanted us to do a song a friend of his had written called "Make Up Your Mind Before Tomorrow Night." So we spent all day on "Make Up Your Mind" but we still needed a B-side. Back in those days, when records were still vinyl, the 45-rpm singles had the song that you thought was your best record on the A-side and a different song on the B-side. Later, when FM stations got the capability of broadcasting in stereo, and when they started playing rock music, record companies started putting a mono version on one side of the record and a stereo version of the same song on the other side. So for a while after that there were fewer B-sides, which was a shame because some great songs were discovered on B-sides. The biggest of all time was probably Elvis's "Don't Be Cruel," which was actually the B-side to "Hound Dog."

Anyway, Chips let us cut "Keep on Dancing," a song that he really didn't care for, as the B-side of "Make Up Your Mind." But there was one problem. We'd sped up the original version



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of the song, but we hadn't added anything to it — no extra verses or choruses or instrumental sections. So, of course, our version was very short — little more than a minute long. Chips said, "It's too short, but we'll figure out what to do with it." Well, Chips was a "genius." He took the tape and spliced it together and just started the whole thing over again. As it turned out, that became the tune's big hook. It stopped, completely, right in the middle. Then there was the drum roll and it began again. Everybody thought it was such a great gimmick, but the truth was Chips had simply taken the easiest route to filling out the B-side.

We were still playing the T. Walker Lewis YMCA, but we went back on George Klein's "Talent Party" and filmed "Keep on Dancing." The phones rang off the hook again, so Chips pressed the record and put it out in Memphis on the Youngstown label. It started selling, and Chips contacted MGM Records again. This time MGM said, "They still might be doing well because they're local. Why don't you put this record out in Chattanooga? We'll help you. And also put it out in Nashville, because no one knows the Gentrys there yet. We'll get the airplay for you, and if the record starts selling, we'll give you a deal."

They released "Keep on Dancing" in Nashville, and they released it in Chattanooga, and before you know it we had a deal on MGM Records. That was in the summer of 1965. By September, "Keep on Dancing" was #4 on *Billboard* magazine's Hot 100 singles chart — that's #4 in the nation.

We were just starting our senior year of high school when "Keep on Dancing" hit, but MGM flew us out every weekend to promote the record. I remember the first weekend we went to Dallas, Texas, where "Keep on Dancing" was getting airplay.



A guy named Roy Head opened the show, and he did his hit, "Treat Her Right." We came on and did "Keep on Dancing." Then a group called the Statler Brothers came on. They would later become huge stars in country music, but their very first hit, "Flowers on the Wall," went to #4 on the pop charts (as well as #2 on the country charts), so they were on this show, like us, trying to make a name for themselves. Then the Beach Boys came on and did their hits. The evening's Main Event, to use a wrestling term, was Chuck Berry. The next day we all went to Houston and did the same show again. And that's the kind of thing we did for the next couple of months, just promoting our record.

Back in Memphis, at Treadwell High, we'd become the big guys on campus. All of a sudden our hair was growing a little bit long — like the Beatles. Yes, we wore the Beatle boots, and the girls would scream over us. Every time we'd do an appearance around town we'd have to get police security or girls would tear our clothes off. It was really crazy.

The only one who brought us back down to earth was our school principal, Mr. Mayberry. Back then they had really strict dress codes. You couldn't have any facial hair — we were fine on that count — and you couldn't have "long" hair. It could barely even cover your ears. Nobody had mentioned a thing about our hair until we were getting ready to graduate. Then Mr. Mayberry got us all together. "Boys," he said, "it's gonna be bad if y'all can't go onstage to get your diploma because your hair's too long."

We said, "Well, Mr. Mayberry, we're onstage every night anyway, so it really doesn't matter." But we all went out and got our hair cut.



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We graduated from high school, and immediately the Gentrys hit the road. We signed with Dick Clark promotions through a subsidiary in Memphis — a guy named Ray Brown who had a booking agency called National Artist Attractions. A lady named Betty Hayes worked with him; they were, I guess, partners. At the time they represented Jerry Lee Lewis, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, who had a huge hit with “Wooly Bully,” “the Godfather of Sax” Ace Cannon, and a lot of other groups.

They booked us on all the TV shows. We did “Hullabaloo” and “Shindig” and “Where the Action Is.” And Dick Clark put us on a number of his bus tours. We were out on the road with Paul Revere and the Raiders. We did some stuff with Sonny and Cher, Herman’s Hermits, the Dave Clark Five, the Grassroots. We played the Whiskey-a-Go-Go in Hollywood, California, and our warm-up act featured future superstars Steve Stills and Neil Young. I don’t think they even had a record deal back then. The fact was, the Gentrys were bigger than Buffalo Springfield, so they opened for us. Just a few months later, of course, they would have their hit, “For What It’s Worth (Stop, Hey What’s That Sound)” and go on to bigger and better things.

Those were the glory days of the Sunset Strip. While the Gentrys performed, the Turtles were playing just down the street. And the Byrds were playing in yet another club. They’d come in to see us after their show, and the place was packed. Or we’d take an hour break between sets and go next door, say, to the Galaxy Room, or maybe it was the Rainbow Room, and see Little Richard play. One night I had my camera up to take a picture of Little Richard and he stopped right in the middle of



a song: “No pictures *pleeease* — unless I pose.” I took the picture, and he started right back into the number.

For six young guys just out of a Tennessee high school, Hollywood was wonderful, if a bit overwhelming — and we did learn a few things the hard way. During our first trip to L.A. — we were doing Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” — we all went to Venice Beach. For some of us, it was our first experience of any beach. We laid our towels down, and put our billfolds underneath our pants.

So these guys come by and sit down close to us and go, “Hey, do you guys ever surf? Where’re you from?”

“We’re from Memphis.”

“Oh, really? Man, how ya doin’? You’re in a group? You have long hair. That’s really cool.”

So we start talking to them and they go, “Brother, this won’t even cost you anything. You want to learn how to surf? Here.”

They had two surfboards, and they took us out and showed us what to do. “Hey, y’all are doing good. Is it all right if we sit on y’all’s towels?”

We said, “Sure.” I mean, we didn’t think there might be thieves on a beach. There’s no beach in Memphis.

So we we’re out there goofing around, and it was just great. Of course, we didn’t watch them when they were with our stuff. When we brought the surfboards back, they came down and met us as we were getting out of the water. “Well, guys, it was fun,” they said. “We gotta go.”

One went one way. One went the other. We walk on up and get our towels and dry off. We sit back down. One of the guys goes, “You know what? My billfold looks funny. Man, my



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money's gone!" I looked at mine. "My money's gone." Everybody's going: "My money's gone."

They suckered us in. We had to wire our manager in Memphis to get more cash sent to us.

We cut an album called *Keep on Dancing* for MGM. Then we did a second album, *Gentry Time*. We didn't really make much off the albums. Like anything else back then, we were kind of young and dumb and full of gaga, and most of what money we did make was from touring.

The live shows were unbelievable. I've still got a program from one of those gigs — it was Murray the K's Easter show. Murray the K was the big deejay at WABC, the top station in New York. At night you could hear WABC all the way down the East Coast, right into the Carolinas. On this tour we did three shows a day and each group did three songs. It started off with Deon Jackson, who had a hit called "Love Makes the World Go Round." Joe Tex, the soul singer whose biggest hit at the time was "Hold What You've Got," was also on the bill. Little Anthony and the Imperials had two huge ballads, "Goin' Out of My Head" and "Hurt So Bad." Jay and the Americans had their big hits "Only in America" and "Cara Mia." The Shangrilas were still riding on "Leader of the Pack" and they had also just hit with "I Can Never Go Home Anymore." The Young Rascals hadn't yet dropped the "Young" from their name, and they had just made their big debut with "Good Lovin'." Even Patti LaBelle and the Blue Belles performed. What an unforgettable experience.

It wasn't all fun and games on the road, though. In Buffalo, while we were doing a show with the Kingsmen of "Louie Louie" fame, we were hammered by a blizzard. We were literally



snowed in, trapped in a hotel for a week. From there we eventually made our way to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; our equipment, however, wasn't as fortunate. We sent our bass player back to track it down. But we still had the show to do, so we used some of the other bands' equipment: I stood with a bass that night and faked like I was playing. Our keyboardist played the bass parts on the organ, but I wore that axe around my neck and acted like I was really playing. We even turned the amp on so the red power light would glow, but we had the volume all the way down. It was so embarrassing. There's always kids in the audience who want to be guitar players, bass players, whatever, and I remember some of them, right up front, looking at me to see how I was playing. So I really had to try to keep my hands moving all night. When I'd go up to the mic to sing, at least, I could do like the Beatles, and throw my hands in the air. For the better part of the show I tried to keep my back to the crowd and fool around with the dummy amp.

The road could be dangerous, too. If you're going up and down the highway night after night, sooner or later you're going to have a wreck. The odds got the better of us when we were driving back to Memphis from Jacksonville, Florida. We had just played a show with the Grass Roots and the Music Machine, who had the hit "Talk Talk." We were in a station wagon, pulling a big U-Haul trailer, and it was raining. I remember we were going over harmonies, when we hit a slick spot in the road. Suddenly, the car spun: we were on the median — heading down the highway backwards with the U-Haul trailer leading us. It felt like we covered 10 miles, but it was nowhere near that far, of course. As we sped along, the trailer was straight, and the car was straight, but everything



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was in reverse. We were all thinking the same thing — *just hang on, hang on, and we'll stop and it'll all work out*. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, the trailer flipped over, which in turn caused the car to go up onto its side. We had to get a tow truck to come out to get all of our wheels back onto the ground. The Gentrys limped back into Memphis with one side of the car looking like a hurricane had hit it — but we were lucky to be alive.

After the success of “Keep on Dancing,” our next single, “Spread It on Thick,” didn’t fare as well. It peaked in the first week of January 1966 at #50 on Billboard’s Hot 100, while the B-side, “Brown Paper Sack,” got some regional airplay. Today, a record like that would never have been heard. Now, radio stations barely have enough material in heavy rotation to be able to put together their own Top 20 list. But in the sixties, so many records got airplay that *Billboard* had a “Bubbling Under” chart — it was created specifically for those singles that were about to crack the Hot 100. “Brown Paper Sack” made it to #101, which was the best of the “Bubbling Under.” So, we were still getting airplay in some areas — and we still had a loyal following.

In 1966 we released a song called “Every Day I Have to Cry,” which had been a #46 hit for a guy named Steve Alaimo back in 1963. He had been a regular on “Where the Action Is” and later went on to head his own company, Vision Records, in Miami, Florida. Our version of the song made it to #77 — it was the last original Gentrys single to make the chart.

The ride lasted several years, but when the hits dried up we started having to play clubs and fraternity parties again. Even though the money was halfway decent, it got to the point



where it was tough to get by. A few of the guys had gotten married, and the work became a strain on their relationships. Eventually, some of them decided to leave.

Finally, things boiled down to the point where the only ones left in the band were the three singers: myself, Larry Raspberry, who also played guitar, and Bruce Bowles, who was now playing bass. And then it happened. Late in 1969, Larry came over to my house in Memphis and said, "Jimmy, I want to start doing original music, so I'm gonna leave the group. I hope you take care of it. It's all yours."

There I was, standing in my back yard with tears running down my cheeks, wondering what in the world I'm going to do, because Larry had always been our leader and arranger. So I went to see Knox Phillips, the son of the man who'd discovered and produced Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins. Knox said, "Jimmy, I'm glad you came down here because we're fixing to revive the old Sun label with a man named Shelby Singleton out of Nashville. And the thing he's after, besides all of the old stuff that we've got on Jerry Lee and Johnny and Carl, is something new. With all your previous hits for MGM you might just be what Shelby's looking for. Have you got anything original?"

Well I just happened to have pulled out my old autoharp and written a song called "Why Should I Cry." I played it for Knox, and he loved it. We went in and cut the record and all of a sudden, four weeks later, with a new Gentrys, "The Mouth of the South" was back on the charts.

As 1970 began, "Why Should I Cry" was the #61 hit according to *Billboard*, and the newest version of the Gentrys were touring and playing one-nighters, with me now leading



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the group. Then we cut a song called “Cinnamon Girl,” written by Neil Young. Yes, the same Neil Young who, with Buffalo Springfield, three years earlier, had opened for the Gentrys at the infamous Whiskey-a-Go-Go. He had just gone solo and released an album with his backup group, Crazy Horse. We heard “Cinnamon Girl” and loved it, so we cut it too and put it out as a single. Our version must have opened some eyes at Neil’s record company, because in April of 1970, just as our version was peaking out at #52 on *Billboard*’s charts, Neil’s version was released as a single. His “Cinnamon Girl” only went to #55, so we got the better of him — that time. Still, the song kicked off his solo career.

Then we went to England. While we were there I heard a demo of a song called “Wild World”; it was by a new artist named Cat Stevens. I shipped the demo back to Knox Phillips, and as soon as the Gentrys got off the plane we went straight to Sun Studios and cut it. As it turned out, we didn’t get the same kind of jump on Cat Stevens as we had on Neil Young. We did have a #28 hit on the Easy Listening charts with “Wild World,” but on the Hot 100 chart our record was going head-to-head with his. He made it to #11 in February 1971, while ours lasted just two weeks on the Hot 100 — grinding to a halt at #97. It was the beginning of a great career for Cat Stevens — and the beginning of the end for the Gentrys.

During this time, I also scored another kind of big hit. One afternoon, my drummer and I went over to a teen dance club called the Roarin’ Sixties, where the Gentrys had played some. I met a girl from Trebin High School named Ida Lee. We spent the next thirty years — three kids and three careers later — together.



“Wild World” was the last chart single for the Gentrys — but I still consider myself fortunate. Unlike many who experience early success in that business, I’d had a second, good ride. Finally, though, I realized the road was killing me. I booked the Gentrys into a club in the Ramada Inn in Memphis so we could stay in one place. I know that must sound ironic, now, coming from someone who’s been on the road — and loving it — for the last 25 years, but traveling conditions then were not as they are now, and I had been gigging constantly since my senior year in high school. I was looking forward to sleeping in my own bed every night, playing music for fans in my own hometown and taking a paycheck to the bank every week.

What I had no way of knowing was that rock and roll was on a collision course with professional wrestling. Ten years before Cyndi Lauper and Captain Lou Albano ever dreamed of bringing the two together in a video, rock and wrestling would meet head-on at the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis, Tennessee — and I was at the middle of it all.







# Rock Meets Wrestling

Jerry Lawler

It was a Monday night in 1978 and the Gentrys were playing “Keep on Dancing” for the one-zillionth time. All of a sudden, a charismatic, blond stranger comes out from backstage, grabs a guitar and busts it over the head of our harmony singer.

No, the Gentrys had not fallen so low that we were playing the “fightin’ and dancin’” clubs the South is so famous for. This was the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis, with thousands of people in the audience. The guy sitting in to sing harmony was Jerry “The King” Lawler, and the guitar-buster was his archrival, Handsome Jimmy Valiant.

Welcome to professional wrestling.

How did I get in the middle of this? Oddly, it was music — not wrestling — that brought Jerry Lawler and me together.

By the mid-seventies, there was more than one King in



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Memphis. What Elvis was to music, Jerry “The King” Lawler was to wrestling. He was the Main Event, the headliner, and the biggest box office attraction in the territory.

Lawler also aspired to be a singer, as I found out one day at Sun Studios. A guy there came up to me and said, “Jimmy, Jerry Lawler, the wrestler, is going to be coming in here.”

I was excited. I said, “Oh, man, I love wrestling! I’ve seen him on TV.”

I had also seen Jerry in high school. He’d been at Treadwell too, but he was a couple of years behind me, so I never really got to know him. He knew of the Gentrys, though: our records and shows made us campus celebrities. Lawler had always loved music, which I didn’t know at the time; and I had always loved wrestling, which he had no way of knowing. He had decided to put out a little album on the side. When I learned that his promoter had called to see if anyone at Sun was interested in backing him up, I said, “Absolutely, I’d love to.”

We cut the record at Ardent, a famous Memphis studio where a lot of big name groups have recorded. It was a thrill for Jerry to have me on the album because he had followed the Gentrys’ career for years, and it was a thrill for me to be singing with “The King” of Memphis wrestling. Jerry probably thought that recording session would be his ticket to musical stardom. Instead, it would be my ticket into professional wrestling.

We were hanging out at Ardent, and the musicians — being typical musicians of the seventies — started passing around a bottle of wine. When it came to me, I said, “I’m sorry, I don’t drink.” Jerry was sitting next to me, so the bottle went to him next, and he said, “I don’t drink either.”



So, I thought, big deal. A little while later they passed around a joint, I said, “Sorry, I don’t smoke.” Lawler says, “Hey, I don’t smoke either.”

Then he said, “I know you played football in high school. Do you play softball?”

I said, “Well, not very much anymore because I’ve been gone on the road.”

“Every Sunday we have a softball game, and in the winter we play football. Man, if you want to play some sports with us on weekends . . .”

So that’s how Lawler and I made our connection, first in the studio with music, then by the fact that neither of us drank or smoked pot. That led to weekend softball games with Lawler and his buddies.

By this time the Gentrys had given up the road, and we were playing the Ramada Inn on Lamar Avenue. We did two shows a night and performed all our hits — “Keep on Dancing,” “Cinnamon Girl,” “Why Should I Cry” and “Every Day I Have to Cry” — for appreciative local crowds. We hadn’t had a record on the charts for seven years, but we were making an okay little living and, more importantly, we didn’t have to travel.

At that time, Memphis Wrestling ran a weekly circuit that included a show in Tupelo, Mississippi, every Friday night. After the matches, the wrestlers would immediately drive back to Memphis, because they had a live TV show on Saturday morning on Channel 5. On the way into town they’d head down Lamar Avenue. They’d drive right by the Ramada Inn, where the Gentrys were playing, and eventually they started coming in to see us. Lawler would lead the pack, and Bill



## The Mouth of the South

Dundee, Plowboy Frazier, Jimmy Valiant — all the big stars of Memphis Wrestling back then — would join him. Before you knew it, word spread about our celebrity audience. When folks learned that their favorite stars would be there on Friday nights, we began packing the club with wrestling fans. We had a great crowd and we made good money.

One day Lawler came to me and said, “Jimmy, man, you’re out here wasting away doing this music. It’s great and it’s fun and all that, but you need to make some real cash. I need to get you in professional wrestling.”

Bells went off in my head, so I asked, “What have you got in mind?”

“What are you doing on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays?”

“Not much.”

“Well, we’re having some trouble promoting some of our towns. How would you like to do some stuff with us? You can still do what you’re doing at the Ramada, but you can work for us the rest of the time, putting up posters and doing promotion. I’d love to have you. People know who you are. I’d like you to come down to the matches on Monday night and sit at ringside. I think the people would love to see you.”

After that, if the Gentrys were going to play on a Monday, I’d always make sure that our first set wasn’t scheduled until 9:30, so, at very least, I’d get to stay at the wrestling matches for an hour-and-a-half. My big thrill was getting to sit next to Lance Russell, the dean of wrestling announcers. It was fabulous.

Originally, what Lawler meant by getting me into professional wrestling was simply for me to help out with promotion — not to get anywhere near the ring. My days were free, so



I started helping out with some of the towns on the circuit. I'd drive in prior to the event. I'd have a guy with me, and we'd put the posters up, making sure the whole town was covered. Most of these places were relatively small, towns like Blythville or Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Tupelo or Hernando, Mississippi, where the boys might wrestle in high school gyms. There were no big radio or TV stations in these little towns, so we got the word around by putting up flyers. The people in the area were accustomed to going to the local supermarket or barbershop or whatever, and checking out our posters to see what the big matchups were going to be. The posters would also have ticket prices and the start time on them — and part of my job became making sure that our tickets were always on sale at the right time. When a town did have a radio station I'd do radio interviews and help line the wrestlers up to do more promotion — and my success in the music business helped open a few doors. Basically, I'd meet and greet the people. If an event didn't have a ring announcer, I'd occasionally do the intros. Again, everybody knew me from the Gentrys, so it was great.

Buddy Wayne, who wrestled some and also had a little wrestling school in Memphis, used to carry our ring, but when they ran two towns on the same night they'd need to fix up a second ring and I'd carry it for them. Of course, they had people there to set it up. So I'd carry the extra ring, posters, tickets, even wrestlers. I remember one time pulling the ring on a flatbed trailer through a driving rainstorm, carrying two women wrestlers and four midgets. We had a flat tire, so I had to try to hook a ride with these two big ol' girls and all these little people. Finally an old truck driver stopped and somehow



## The Mouth of the South

we all piled in. I sent somebody back to get the ring truck, and the matches went on like nothing had happened.

So I got my feet wet a little bit in wrestling doing whatever needed to be done in terms of promotion, becoming a team player. I loved it from the very first day.

Then a crazy thing happened. Jerry Lawler did a loser-leave-town match with Handsome Jimmy Valiant — and Jerry lost. He said he was going to retire, and he did. Lawler had to, because he'd said that "win, lose or draw," that's what he was going to do. And back then, when a wrestler said or agreed to something, people expected them to back it up. So since he couldn't wrestle, he got more involved in music.

I've always told people that Jerry Lawler couldn't carry a tune if it had handles, but he really did have a pretty good voice. His image was the real obstacle to any singing success he might have truly hoped for; because as far as wrestling fans were concerned, he was still "The King" of Memphis Wrestling. He and his partner in the Memphis territory, Jerry Jarrett, had simply painted themselves into a corner with the loser-leave-town angle.

In wrestling there are always two sides to every coin. When you boil everything down to its essence you've got a bad guy and you've got a good guy — a heel and a babyface. People want to see the babyface beat the crap out of the heel. It's as simple as that. But you've got to have that combination. I don't care if you're Muhammad Ali — if you haven't got somebody the people want to see get their butt kicked, then they're not going to give you their hard earned money. Nobody's going to come to see you.

When Lawler first got into the business he was part of a bad guy tag team, and he became a great heel. People truly hated



him. Although he was from Memphis, he came into the promotion as an outsider, from the Alabama territory. He had long hair and a beard, and from the start he was a great talker. He called the fans rednecks. He called Lance Russell, the ring announcer, “Banana Nose.” At the high point of one feud, in 1973, he hid out in the crowd dressed as a woman and asked Jerry Jarrett, who was supposed to be his opponent later that night, for an autograph. When Jarrett came over, Lawler beat him up with his purse.

You gotta love that kind of imagination, right? After a while, the people got to where they loved to hate Jerry Lawler. So at some point his manager, Sam Bass, decided to put a crown on his head and declare him “The King” of Memphis. And then people loved to hate him even more. No matter how much people hate you, sometimes, the more you’re on TV, the more you become a bigger celebrity and a bigger star, eventually they start liking you. Think about J.R. Ewing from the “Dallas” TV series — he was a guy you loved to hate. And then there was basketball star Dennis Rodman — people loved to rip him, but he helped put butts in the stands. He hustled, showboated, dyed his hair every color of the rainbow, but he got all kinds of lucrative endorsement and merchandizing deals. If people weren’t buying all those products, if folks didn’t love to hate him, he wouldn’t have become such a huge star. It’s the same thing in wrestling.

Handsome Jimmy Valiant was the face in Memphis at the time, but he still needed a bad guy to work with. And all of a sudden the territory’s main heel wasn’t available because Valiant had made the “mistake” of beating him in a loser-leave-town match. Like I said, in those days, you couldn’t go back on



## The Mouth of the South

your word. Back then wrestling was as “real” as it gets. I mean, it was a deadly serious business, with serious consequences. As far as the fans were concerned, if you lost a match with a hair stipulation, your hair had to come off or they’d tear the building down. If you lost a dog food match — as I later did — you had to eat dog food. The people of Memphis paid good money to see Jerry Lawler get his butt kicked and have to leave town. There was no way of avoiding it — he had promised.

For a while Lawler and Jarrett were between a rock and a hard place. The longer “The King” was out of action, the greater the economic damage. Crowds would begin to “go South” if there wasn’t somebody truly despised for Handsome Jimmy Valiant to fight. Lawler quickly figured a way out of it, but for a while, to the whole world, it looked like he was literally leaving town.

He came to me and said, “What I would love, Jimmy, is for you to come on TV, on Channel 5 this Saturday. Those people know about the music and know we’re associated. And what I’d like to do is start going around the country playing music with the Gentrys. But we’ll build it up now, like this, to let people know that while you’re on tour, I’m not sitting at home twirling my thumbs.”

So I went down to Channel 5 for the weekly live wrestling show. Lance Russell, the commentator, said, “Coming out now, you know him from the Gentrys. He’s had some big, big records around town here . . . Jimmy Hart.”

So I came out. He said, “Jimmy, I know you’re out here to make a special announcement.”

I said, “Yes, I am. Whether you like Jerry Lawler or whether you hate him, this coming Monday night at the Mid-South



Coliseum you're going to see 'The King' in concert with the Gentrys. After that he's going to go on a small national tour with us. We just wanted the fans here to see him for the last time, and to let them know that he hasn't been sitting at home doing nothing. He's a rock star now."

On the following Monday night, the Gentrys went down and set up our equipment at the Coliseum. As we were doing "Keep on Dancing" and Lawler was singing with me, Handsome Jimmy Valiant approaches from the back. Then Valiant knocks my guitar player down, picks up a guitar and busts it over Lawler's head.

Now in wrestling, you don't just get mad. What do you do? You get even. The people realized that Lawler couldn't retire and leave town after he'd been attacked. He had to get even. So he jumped back into the ring again. In the meantime he and I continued to develop what was already becoming a great relationship.

I was happy just being associated with professional wrestling, but then the spell that music casts kicked in again, and took everything to the next level. It started with a phone call from Jerry Jarrett, Lawler's Memphis Wrestling partner.

Professional wrestling was the Jarrett family business. His mother, Christine Jarrett, had started as a ticket-seller in Nashville. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Nick Gulas and his partner Roy Welch ran the Tennessee territory from Nashville. Gulas's son George became a wrestler; Welch, his three brothers, his son Buddy Fuller, and his grandsons, Ron and Robert Fuller, were all wrestlers, too. Jerry Jarrett grew up in this family atmosphere. As a kid he sold programs and tickets for the matches in Nashville, and he started wrestling in 1969.



## The Mouth of the South

About that time, his mother had moved up in the organization to where she was promoting some of Gulas's shows in Louisville, Lexington, Kentucky, and Evansville, Indiana.

Tag teams were big back then, and there were a lot of masked teams in the area. That way the promoter could put the masks on four or six wrestlers and book the same tag team in more than one city on a given night. The biggest babyface wrestlers were Jackie Fargo and Tojo Yammamoto. At various times, Jerry Jarrett was a tag team partner with both Fargo and Tojo, and he won the Southern tag team belt with both of those guys.

It was Fargo who discovered Jerry Lawler in Memphis, working at a radio station and drawing caricatures of wrestlers. He encouraged Lawler to get into the business in the Alabama territory, which had just started up in Montgomery and was run by Bill Golden, Roy Welch's son-in-law. Around 1972, Lawler moved up to Gulas's territory, and tagged up with Jim White, who had been one of the masked Green Shadows, with Sam Bass as their manager. Almost immediately they became one of the top heel tag teams in the territory.

By 1974, Jim White wanted out of the business so Lawler started wrestling as a single, still with Sam Bass as his manager. He had a great, long-running feud with Jackie Fargo for the Southern heavyweight title and for the "King of Memphis" title. Jerry Jarrett was still wrestling then, too, but Jerry was a little smaller than most wrestlers (just like his son Jeff, who in 2000 would become WCW's heavyweight champ), so he started working behind the scenes. He took over the booking from Roy Welch (Gulas's partner) when Welch's health began to fail. By the mid-seventies, Jerry Jarrett was the guy who made the



matches for Nick Gulas, the guy who kept all the feuds and all the heat going in the territory.

Roy Welch had been Nick Gulas's full partner, but Jerry Jarrett wasn't, and I don't think he wasn't making the kind of money he thought he should have been. By that time Gulas's territory was so big that it was split into eastern and western divisions. So Jarrett just decided he would split off and take part of the territory. He went in with Roy Welch's son, Buddy Fuller, and they came to Memphis and started a Memphis organization with Jerry Lawler. They also took Tojo, who was Jerry Jarrett's old tag team partner. Then they branched out. Christine Jarrett, Jerry's mother, ran the shows in Evansville, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky, which had once been part of Gulas's western territory. When Gulas finally went out of business, Jarrett added Nashville. Jerry's father-in-law was Eddie Marlin, who had also been a wrestler, and Eddie started promoting some of the towns and also made some of the matches. By the time I got involved, all of Jarrett's extended family was involved in Memphis Wrestling, but Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler were the two guys that ran the organization.

Jerry Jarrett called me one day and said, "Jimmy, I love your music and the music you did for Lawler. Can you cut a video on Jimmy Valiant?"

And me, loving wrestling, I go, "I can cut a song on anybody."

So I wrote a song for Jimmy Valiant called "Son of a Gypsy." After we recorded the track Jarrett sent over the Saturday morning camera crew to shoot a video.

If it weren't for that video, I probably wouldn't be in wrestling today.



## The Mouth of the South

The video was good — so good that Jarrett called me and said, “Jimmy, I’m going to put you on the payroll, full-time. I know you’re still doing your music, but I want somebody who can head up promotion. Jerry Lawler likes your work. You’re a hustler. You work hard at it. You’re announcing. You’re already doing all the promotion for us.”

So he put me on the payroll. During the week, I would go from town to town, promoting, and then on Friday and Saturday nights, I’d be with the Gentrys at the Ramada, playing the oldies but goodies. I was having a great time and making good money.

In the meantime, Jerry Lawler was still trying his hand at music. He came to me one day and said, “I’m going to do a concert downtown at the Malaco Theater, and I want you and your group to back me.” I was supposed to go to Blythville, Arkansas, that night to do the wrestling promotion and ring announcing and to take care of the tickets and everything. But when he hired me full-time, Jarrett had told me Lawler was going to be my boss. And that’s how things worked. So, when “The King” told me to forget about Blythville for that night, that he wanted the Gentrys to perform with him instead, that’s precisely what I did.

Jerry Jarrett had been out of town, but when he flew back in, I picked him up at the airport. He said, “Jimmy, wow, Blythville didn’t do too good. What happened?”

I said, “I don’t know.”

“Weren’t you there?”

“No, sir,” I said. “I was at the Malaco Theater with Lawler, singing. I went with Jerry to sing.”

Nothing else came of it right away, and we went on and did the regular Saturday TV show. But when it was over Jarrett put



his arm around my shoulder and walked me out back. He said, "Jimmy, I'm going to have to let you go."

"What do you mean, let me go?"

"Jimmy, you're one of the most talented people I've ever met in my life, but I'm letting you go from professional wrestling. Lawler told you to go do the music, and you went and played the music. I understand that. But I want people who work for me, to work for me, full-time."

"Jerry," I said, "you're the one who told me to do whatever Lawler asked me to do. So that's what I did."

But that was it, end of story.

You see, I was caught in the middle of something, and I didn't know it. At the time, I guess Jarrett and Lawler were almost feuding. And in this particular instance, Jerry Jarrett wasn't just mad because I wasn't in Blytheville, he was mad that Lawler wasn't either. "I want people who work for me to love wrestling first," he said. "If Lawler wants to do his little music thing, that's fine. But it's wrestling that made him, not music. And if he had been in Blytheville we would have done about \$3,000 instead of the \$800 we ultimately drew." So, even though Jarrett was really mad at Lawler, there was nothing he could do to his partner and biggest star. And then he took it out on me. He couldn't fire his partner — but he could fire his partner's accomplice.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. In a flash, I was being exiled from the world I'd come to love most — professional wrestling. It truly broke my heart.

I was lucky enough to still be playing with the Gentrys on weekends. And luckier still, although I didn't even know it at the time, to have the only copy of Jimmy Valiant's video in my possession.



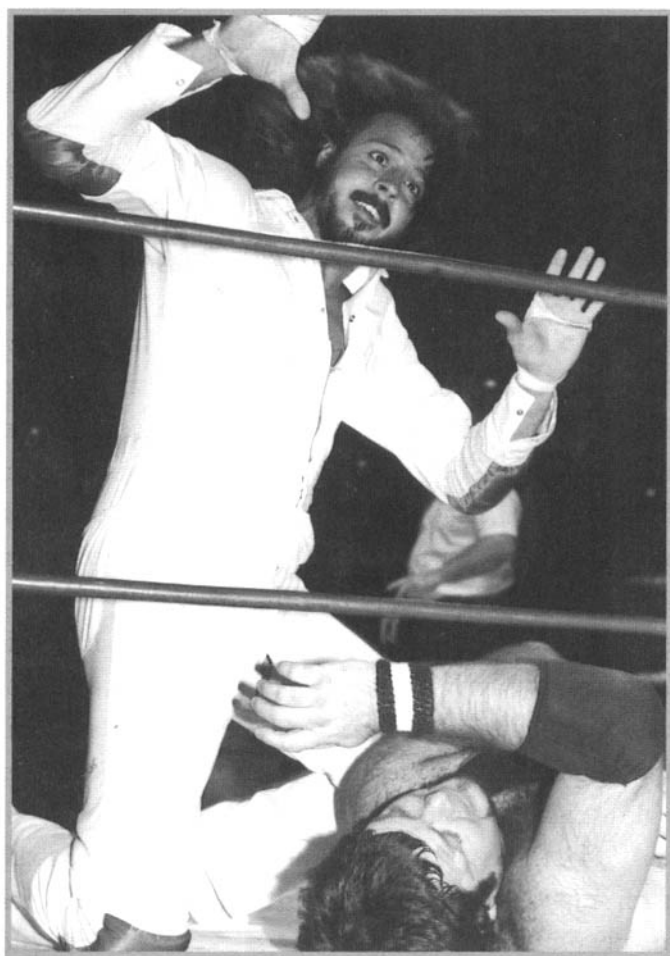
## **The Mouth of the South**

Little did I know — and little did Jarrett or Lawler know, for that matter — that within a few weeks not only would Jimmy Hart be back in professional wrestling, he'd actually be in the ring, about to pin his first opponent, 1-2-3!



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## ...and his manager, Jimmy Hart

This was a cinch.

Since I was 17, as a member of the Gentrys, I'd been playing before thousands and thousands of people. It was nothing for me to be on stage in front of a crowd of 8,000 people, on a tour with Badfinger or Steppenwolf.

But this wasn't a Gentrys show. It's 1979 and I'm not on a stage. This is the Mid-South Coliseum. And I'm in a wrestling ring. I look across at my opponent, I look out at the audience, and for the first time in my career as a performer I'm a nervous wreck.

And then he dive-tackles me and knocks me down. And I realize I'm in a fight for my life.

Just a few weeks earlier Jerry Jarrett had fired me as his promotion man and ring announcer. Now, I was not only back, I was wrestling on Jarrett's big Monday night show in



## The Mouth of the South

Memphis. I had pulled off a swerve as slick as anyone who has ever stepped into the squared circle. And the key to it all was the music video I'd made to promote Handsome Jimmy Valiant.

When Jarrett fired me, he forgot to get the video back. I didn't think any more about it than he did, until I got calls from first one, and then the other, Jerry.

"Jimmy," Lawler said, "have you got a video on Jimmy Valiant?"

"Yes."

"Who told you to do it?"

I told the truth. "Jarrett."

Lawler was calling hot on the heels of Jerry Jarrett, who'd just nervously pleaded, "Man, whatever you do, don't tell Lawler you did that video."

With nothing to lose, my mouth fired away and I let Jarrett have it: "What? Wait a minute. You just let me go from a company that I loved when I did nothing wrong. When I did nothing but follow your instructions to the letter. And buddy, now I'm going to listen to you again?"

He tried not to sound nervous. "Jimmy, I just need to let you know something. This is a serious situation. Lawler is really upset with me. He's mad about you doing the video on Jimmy Valiant."

I said, "So what? What's it got to do with me? Listen, you've made it perfectly clear that you call the shots. You own the company. The way I see it, I've never done anything wrong. First, I did what precisely what you asked me to do. You say Lawler's my boss, so Lawler's my boss. You say cut a song on Valiant, so I cut a song. And then, when I do my job, when I do what Lawler asks me to do, you get mad at me for doing it.



And then you fire me? Why on earth would I want to help you out now?"

"Well, Jimmy, listen to me. I know one day you'll make yourself, and me, a lot of money in professional wrestling, but for now, just trust me on this on this one thing. Don't let Lawler know I told you to do the video."

I hung up on him.

Anyway, like I said, when Lawler called two minutes later that's exactly what I told him: Jerry Jarrett told me to do the Handsome Jimmy Valiant video. That's when Lawler asked, "Are you sure? Jarrett says he didn't have anything to do with it."

So I proved it to him. "King," I said, "do you think that I could get that camera crew down to my house without either you or Jarrett okaying it?" Instantly, Lawler knew that Jarrett was pulling his chain. He hung up.

Minutes later Jarrett was on the phone again. "Jimmy, what did you tell Lawler?"

"I told him the truth."

"Oh my God. Oh jeez."

The line went dead.

When the phone rang again it was Lawler. "Jimmy, you've got to give me the video."

I knew immediately he wanted it for leverage, after catching Jerry Jarrett working behind his back.

But I said, "No! Uh-uh, no way. I've never been hurt more in my life. And why? Because I worked my butt off for y'all. King, I always loved professional wrestling, always wanted to be in it. And you helped me out there and I appreciate it. But Jerry Jarrett let me go for something I did for you. He didn't shoot straight with me, and you didn't either."



## The Mouth of the South

So then Lawler says, “Jimmy, okay, I understand. Listen, I want you in professional wrestling. I want you to be my manager. But I want, I need, that video.”

“No,” I told him. “I don’t believe I want to be in professional wrestling anymore. Not if this is the way it’s gonna be. Not if people are gonna lie to each other. Not if I can’t trust anybody. King, I thought the music business could be bad — but this is worse. Why would I want to stay in a business where I’m gonna be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life?”

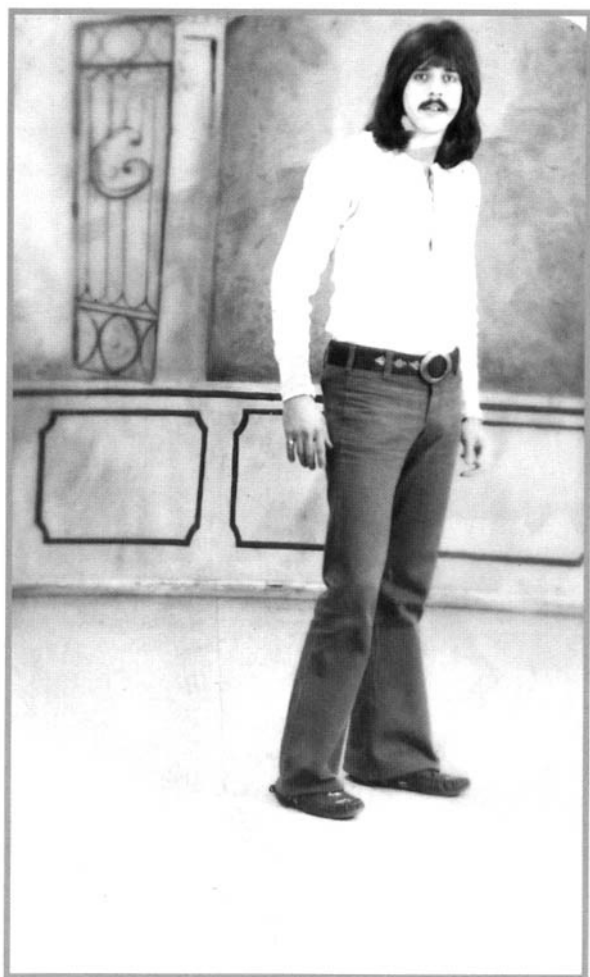
He knew I was serious, that he wouldn’t convince me over the phone. “Look, Jimmy,” he said, “can I come over to your place to talk to you face to face?” I let him come over.

That’s when he asked me to ride with him up to Jonesboro, Arkansas. And on the way there — have I mentioned that Jerry’s the best talker in the world? — he talked me into giving him the video.

In return, I was going to be his manager. By this time, after Valiant had clobbered him with the guitar, Lawler was so popular in Memphis that he’d turned babyface. But I guess that had run its course, because no matter how hard he tried to be a good guy, the fans really preferred loving to hate him. He was getting ready to switch heel again, and he wanted a manager. Every great heel needs a great manager.

So I gave him the video of “Son of a Gypsy.” When he had them play it on Channel 5 the next Saturday morning, Jimmy Valiant, for all his crazy talk, for all the bragging — “Woo, Mick Jagger gave me this ring” and “My brother, Elvis Presley, gave me this watch” — became more of a fan favorite than he’d ever been. The video was that good. I’d lived up to my end









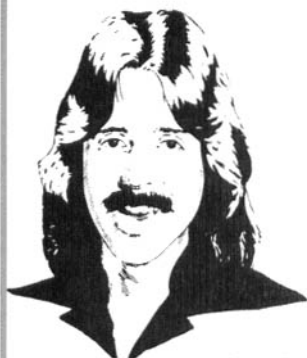
HI, WE'RE  
THE GENTRYS

**LUKE HALPIN**  
**SINGING STAR!**

**WIN  
A  
DAY  
ON  
"ACTION"  
—meet  
KEITH—  
REVERE—  
THE RAIDERS  
& CO.!!**

(SEE PAGE 48)





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"KEEP ON DANCIN'" "CINNAMON GIRL" &  
"WHY SHOULD I CRY" AND OTHERS,



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WITH 5 MILLION SELLER RECORDS!  
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## 'World's Biggest Sock Hop' At Coliseum Friday



**POPULAR MEMPHIS GROUP, THE GENTRYS**  
One of headliners at dance for Heart Fund

The Coliseum has endured the Dave Clark Five and the Beatles—but can it stand "The World's Biggest Sock Hop?"

The answer will come Friday, when 10 of the nation's top recording bands and artists will gather for a gigantic dance and concert, all for the Memphis Heart Association.

The music will start at 7:30 p.m. and will continue 'till midnight. Teen-agers from Memphis and surrounding areas are invited to the dance, sponsored by the Duration Club.

All money from the sale of donation-tickets will go to the Heart Fund. Each performer has contributed his time, and friends of the Heart Association have paid rental fees and other miscellaneous expenses.

A Duration Club member said there will be three stages in the center so one band can get ready to perform while another is playing. There will be continuous performances. George Klein will be master of ceremonies.

Tickets are available at



**HANK WILLIAMS JR.**  
To be at Big Sock Hop

Goldsmith's Central Ticket Office and The Coliseum. Advance donations are \$1.50, donations at the door are \$2.

Bands and performers scheduled for the big dance are: Hank Williams Jr., The Gentrys, Sam the Sham, Flash and the Casuals, Jay Scott and the Actions, Charlie Rich, Jimmy Day and the Nites, The Daytonas, The Ovations, The Jacks, and Bonnie Buckley.





## MEMPHIS, TENN.

Monday, August 31st

### TONIGHT'S CARD

"Last Tango in Memphis"

**Jerry Lawler or Jimmy Hart  
Must Leave Town!**

No Time Limit - No D.Q.

Jerry Lawler & Bill Dundee

-vs-

Dream Machine & Jimmy Hart

**Loser of Fall Leaves Town Match!**

No Time Limit - No D.Q.

Rick & Robert Gibson

-vs-

The Nightmares with Hart

Mid-America Heavy Weight

Title Match

**If Steve Keirn Wins He Gets 5**

Minutes With Donovan!

Steve Keirn

-vs-

Bugsy McGraw with Donovan

**Southern Tag Team Title Match**

Mr. Onita-Masa Fuchi with Tojo

-vs-

Rick Morton & Eddie Gilbert

#### HANDICAP MATCH

Stan Frazier -vs- Heartbreakers

(Frazier's Prize Booster at Stake) If Frazier

Wins He Gets 5 Min. with Jimmy Hart

**8 Man Tag Team Match**

Dutch Mantell-King Cobra

Roy Rogers-Koko Ware

-vs-

Tojo Yamamoto - Golden Boy

The Assassins

Tojo Yamamoto -vs- Dutch Mantell

King Cobra -vs- The Assassin # 1

CHAMPIONSHIP  
WRESTLING  
Presents



## ACTION RINGSIDE

WRESTLING CARD

## MEMPHIS WRESTLING

At The  
Mid-South Coliseum

Watch T. V.'s Wrestling  
Saturday Morning - 11:00



This program is printed weekly  
in the interest of Professional Wrestling  
by Championship Wrestling  
Promotion reserves the right to make necessary  
changes in the scheduled matches.

ACTION RINGSIDE WRESTLING PROGRAM • ACTION RINGSIDE •

## The Ultimate Confrontation



# PROGRAM

• ACTION RINGSIDE WRESTLING PROGRAM • ACTION RINGSIDE •



**SPECIAL REPORT!****Expose' On Jimmy Hart!**

We at ActionRingside have often wondered about the seeming "devotion" that the members of the First Family have on their "president", Jimmy Hart. Through some investigation and many phone calls to a few of Hart's disgruntled former "clients", we have pieced together the whole story concerning Hart's treatment of his men.

When Hart first began his career in wrestling, he was a regular manager. But after his reputation as a maker of champions increased, Hart began practices not normal for a typical manager.

When a man expresses interest in coming to this area or is contacted by Hart, he is convinced by Hart that the only way to the top in this hotbed of wrestling is to have the flamboyant manager in his corner.

When Hart's new client enters the area, Hart signs him to a contract immediately. The contract is not a typical managerial contract stipulating a percentage of the wrestler's earnings goes to Hart. It is a FLAT RATE contract that states a certain amount must be paid to Hart by the wrestler in order to remain in the "Family".

The man buys Hart's complete services - from bag carrying, hotel reservations, laundry service, and chauffeuring service all the way to the booking of his matches and an assurance from Hart that he will interfere in matches and do whatever it takes to make sure the man wins matches and title bouts. Hart is practically a slave to these men.

But if they fall from Hart's favor by losing a match, or a title, or even making Hart mad, the situation changes. Their matches become less and less important, their pay checks smaller because of it and the attention Hart pays them dwindles. BUT THEIR PAYMENTS TO HART REMAIN THE SAME. In some cases the man might be hard pressed to get Hart on the phone. One would wonder who the boss is then. Hart may APPEAR to be a slave but he is actually a warden.

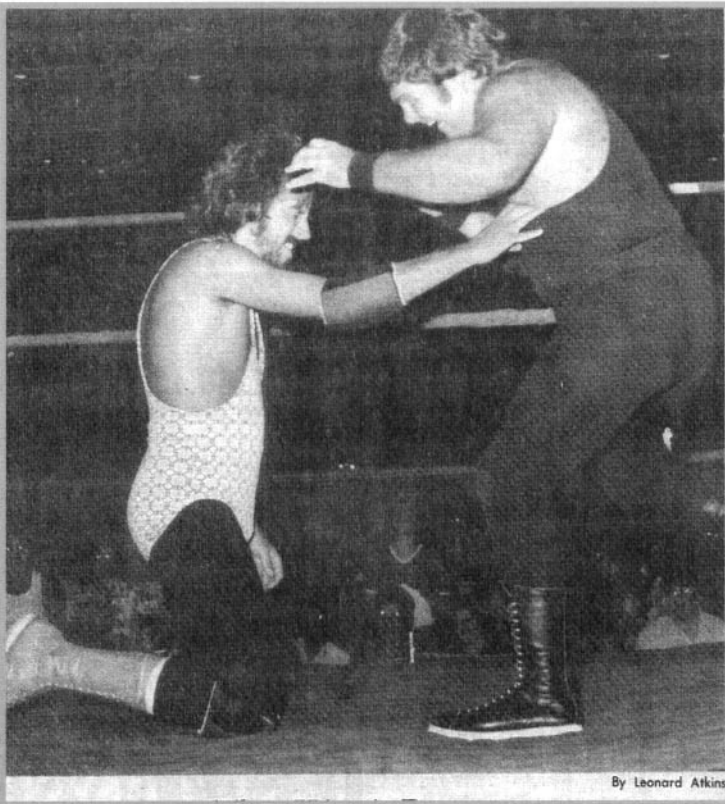
Perhaps someone considering Hart's services will read this and think again but as long as the presence of Hart in the corner means big money, main events, and title belts, there will always be someone willing to take the risks, enter the First Family and become the next one in a long line of Hart's stooges.





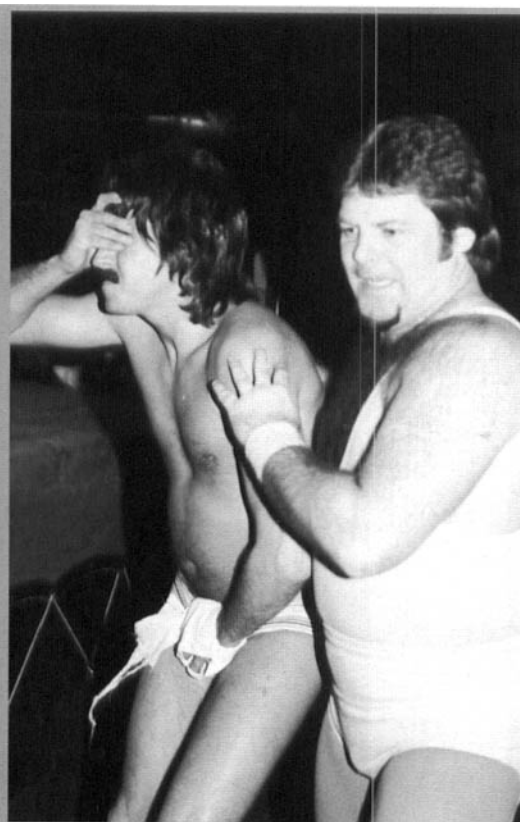
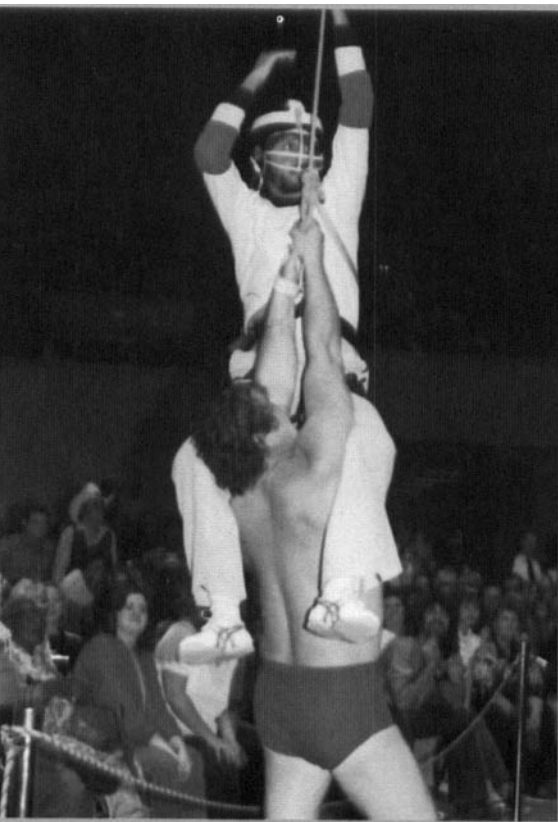


**The fans, or Lawler: in Memphis you were never safe.**



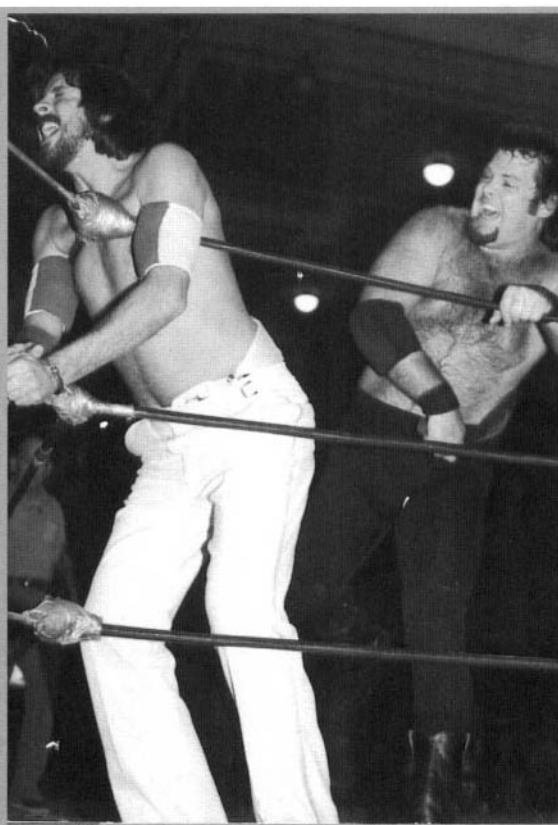
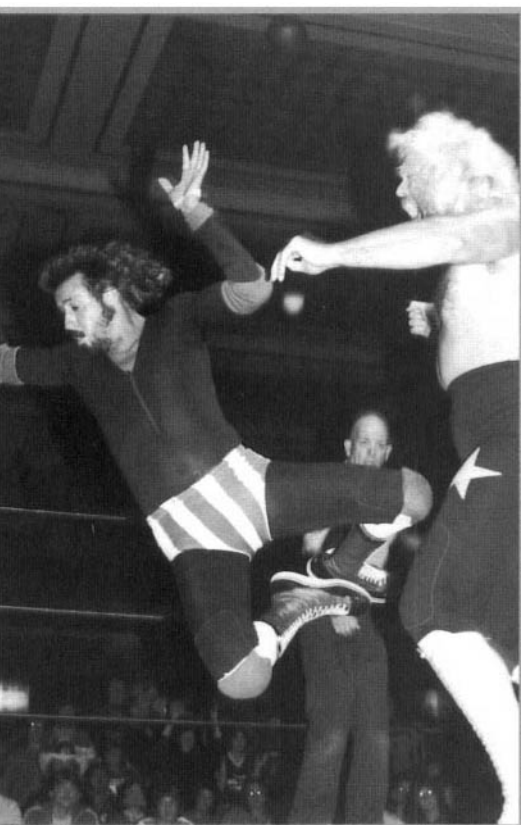
By Leonard Atkins



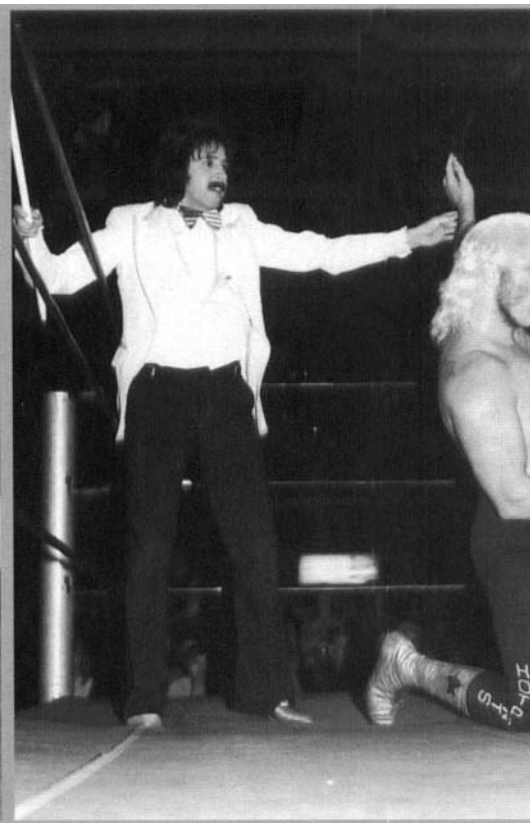


***Stipulations and shame: two of my least finest Memphis moments.***



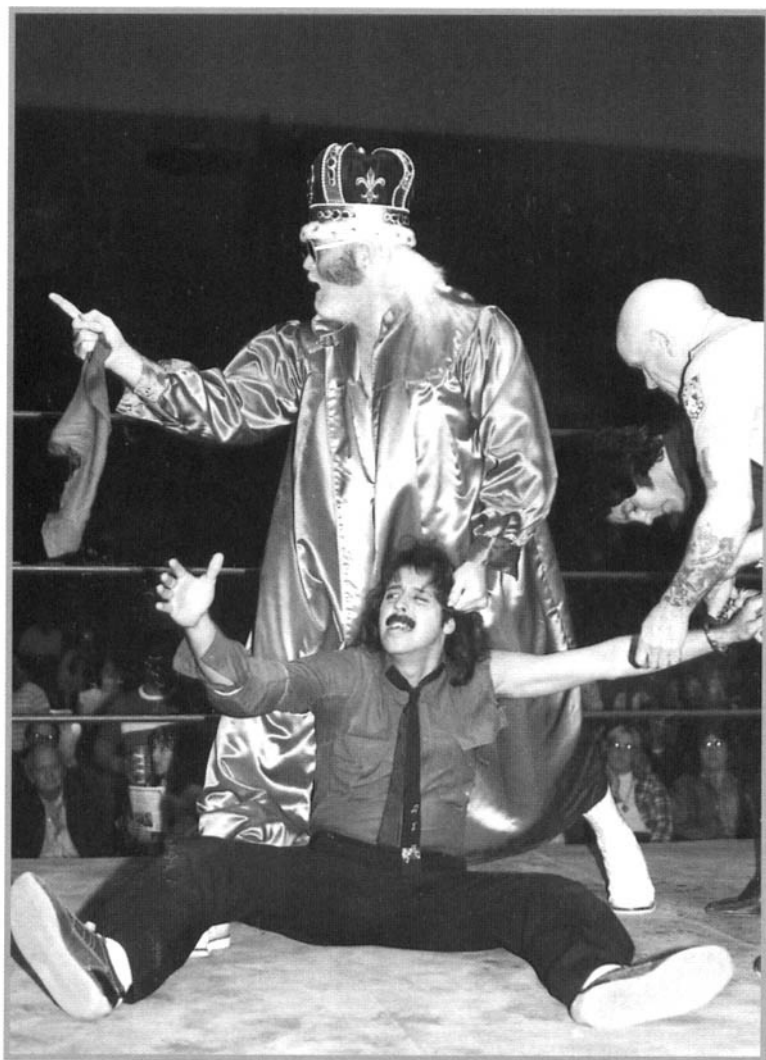






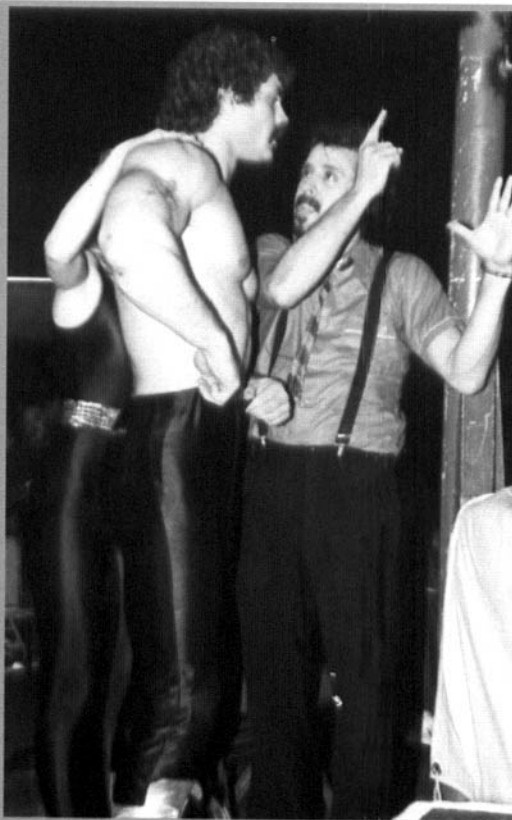
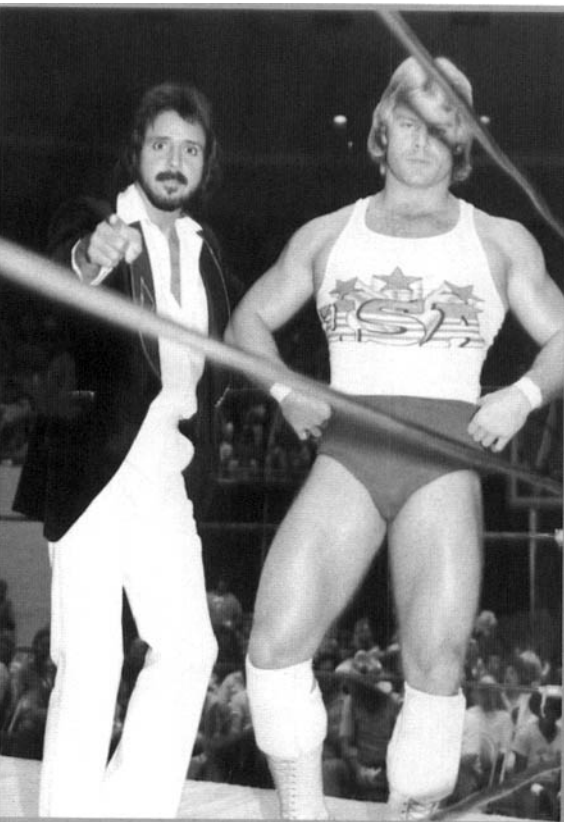
*I've stood behind the best.*





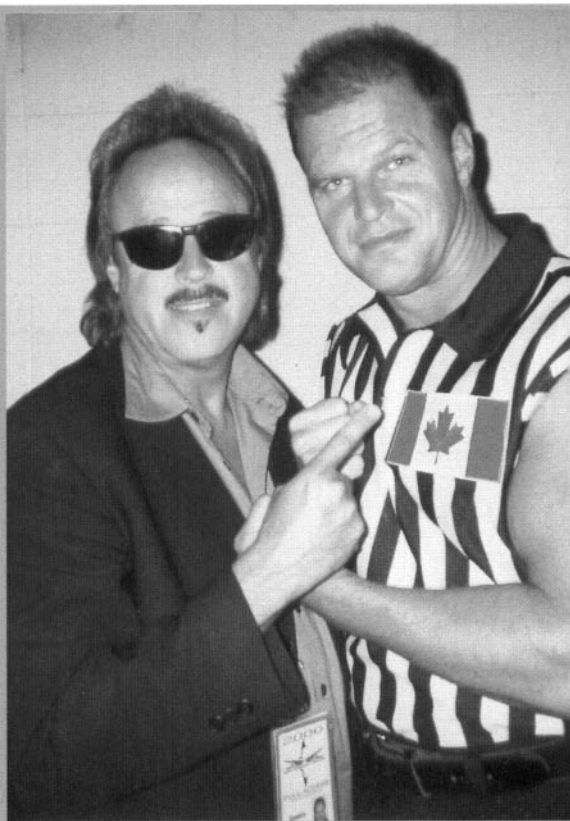
**A new "King," but the same old story.**





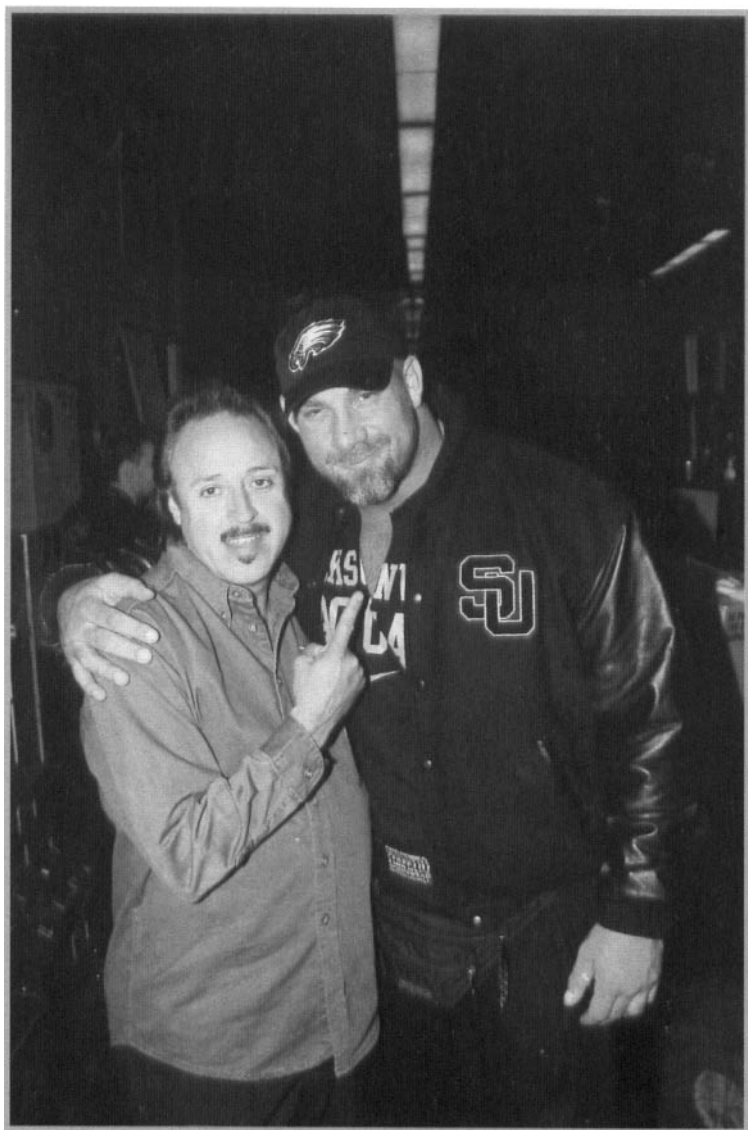
**Making new superstars.**



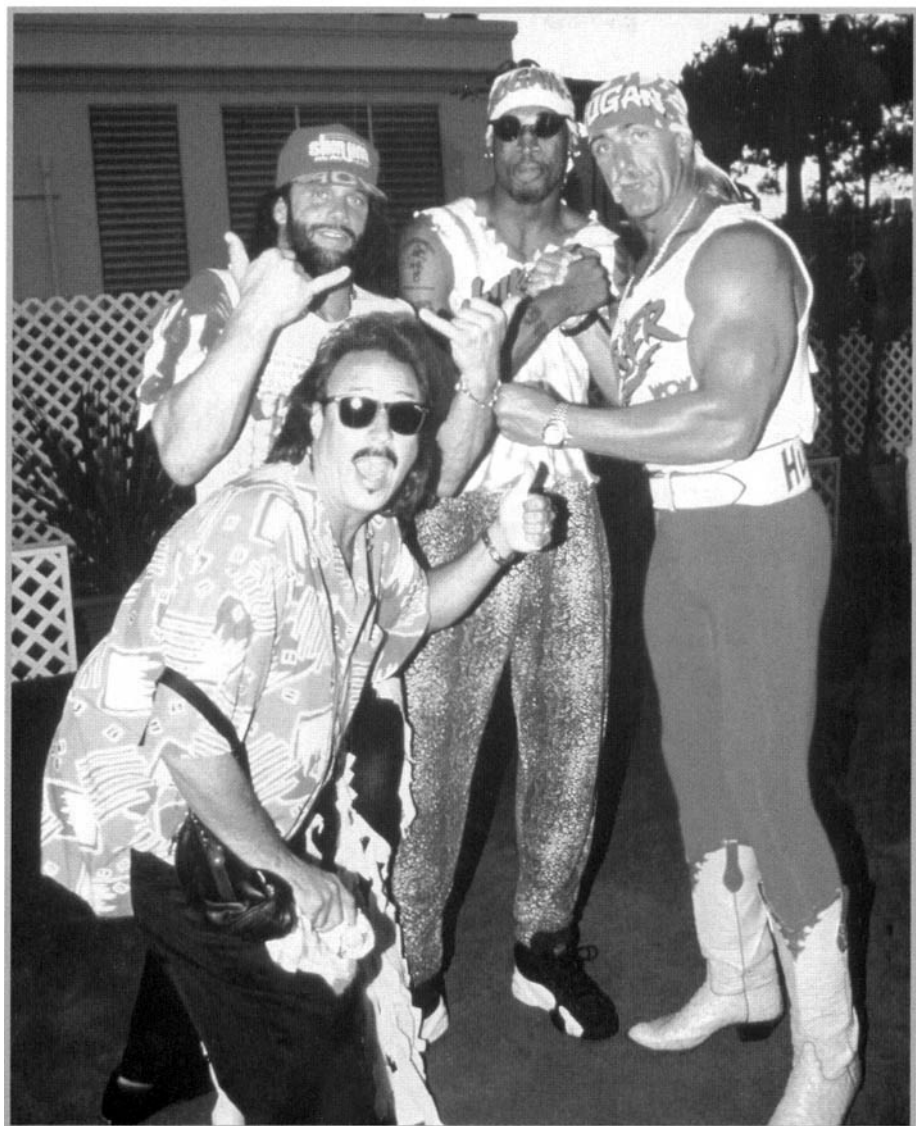


Never trust a midget. . . but a Rougeau as ref is okay by me.















of the bargain. And the following Monday night I helped Lawler turn heel.

My managing career didn't actually begin until halfway through Lawler's regularly scheduled match. When the bell rang, folks had no idea I was going to be in Lawler's corner. The idea was to shock them, mid-way through the action. At first, all Jimmy Hart was expected to do was to sit ringside, with Lance Russell, the announcer. Nobody knew any different because they'd seen me there every Monday night for a year. Lawler was fighting Bill "Superstar" Dundee, and at a certain point in the match, when Dundee got Lawler into trouble, I was supposed to take a heavy chain from my pocket and throw it into the ring. Lawler would grab the weapon, knock Dundee out cold and steal the pinfall. So I sat there, waiting and watching for the planned spot to occur. It does, like clockwork. I calmly remove the chain from my pocket. But, nervous, not wanting to screw up the match, I don't lob the chain into the middle of the ring, not like we've planned. Of course not. Instead, I throw it like a baseball. A wicked fastball. Ninety miles an hour! Luckily it didn't bean anyone. And somehow, unbelievably, it flew, perfectly, right past Lawler's outstretched hand, and wrapped around the middle rope. We couldn't have planned it any better. It looked beautiful. All Jerry had to do was reach back and grab it. And then — boom! Lawler knocked Bill Dundee out. One, two, three . . . "The King" wins! Long live "The King."

And Jimmy Hart passed his first test as a manager.

But that was only the beginning. To this day, part of me still suspects that Lawler and Jarrett, either separately or together, were merely humoring me. After the way I'd been treated, why would I think otherwise? I mean, no one's that naïve, right?



## The Mouth of the South

They might have decided to get me involved again as a ploy — just to make me to give them the “Son of a Gypsy” video. They were probably expecting me to fall flat on my face, that I wouldn’t be able to cut it as a wrestling manager. And when that happened, one of them would be there to put their arm around my shoulder, again, right? To walk me out back? “Sorry, Jimmy, we’re going to have to let you go . . .”

Anyway, the next Saturday morning I’m on TV as Jerry Lawler’s manager. Of course, Bill Dundee comes out to talk about being double-crossed. “Lawler,” he goes, “I’ve got a guy out here with me named Pat Hutchinson. He’s been wrestling for two years.” He turns to the guy. “Pat,” he asks, “how many matches have you won?”

Pat Hutchinson says, “None.”

And Dundee says, “How many have you had?”

“Fifty-six.”

“Lawler, you’ve heard it right here from the man himself. Pat Hutchinson has never won a wrestling match in his life, and I’m telling you right now I think Pat Hutchinson can beat the hell out of Jimmy Hart. Jimmy Hart is nothing but an ex-musician, nothing but a wimp, a sissy, a nothing. I know it and you know it. He shouldn’t be in this business.”

Well, even though I’m known as “The Mouth of the South” now, back then Lawler did all the talking. He came out and answered Dundee for me: “We take that challenge. Monday night, in Memphis, Tennessee, in this very ring, Jimmy Hart will be ready! And I predict, right now, Pat Hutchinson will lose his fifty-seventh straight match.”

Just two days later, before my managing career was even a week old, I found myself standing in middle of the ring.



And then I realized I was in way over my head.

I had done nothing to get ready. I didn't think I needed to. After all, I was a former football player. I played baseball. I played basketball. I thought, gosh, I'm in the greatest shape of my life. This is gonna be easy, right? I'll be great. And that's what I really believed — until I walked through the doors and saw 8,000 people in the Mid-South Coliseum. Then the nerves hit me.

It's unbelievable, now, but here's what I was wearing: red wrestling boots; a flowing, floor-length, red wrestling robe with black trimming (Jerry Lawler had given it to me and I still have it today); and long red tights, with smaller black tights that covered those. To complete the picture, imagine my bare skinny chest, no muscle, just my boney ribcage heaving in and out in terror. What a joke! I could hardly get to the ring for the wrestlers laughing at me — never mind the fans.

Anyway, when I'm finally out there, Lawler's in my corner. And Superstar Bill Dundee's in Hutchinson's corner.

The bell rings.

We start chicken fighting, rolling around. I remember me and Hutchinson falling all over the place, and skinning my knees and elbows. And I remember looking for Lawler as Pat and I rolled around, me out of breath and trying to keep from throwing up right then and there. Lawler had to hide his face to keep from laughing, while Dundee was openly busting a gut on his side of the ring.

As ridiculous as this was, I had watched enough wrestling to almost know how to drop an elbow or put a guy in a headlock. But I also knew that if I did anything remotely like a "real" move, people would think that Jimmy Hart's a professional



## The Mouth of the South

wrestler. So, even though I'd only been in the game for a week, I was clear about what my "style" was expected to be. I was the sissy, the weakling manager, the guy with the big mouth who couldn't back it up. I was the guy everybody hated, who couldn't win a fair fight — the guy who would only ever dare jump you from behind. Face to face, I'd tell you what a great guy you were, but then I'd give you the old Tennessee handshake — which is when you put your right hand out to shake someone's hand, and then knife them with your left. Anyway, that's what I did to Pat Hutchinson. When he eventually pushed me into my corner, Lawler hit him with the same chain I'd used the previous week (while the ref, of course, wasn't looking) and knocked him cold. I covered him for my first victory.

So, I win the match. From there I go directly to the back. And then I throw up for about fifteen minutes. My nerves were shot. I was completely shell-shocked and figured I'd tried, but just failed my second test.

But the next day, Eddie Marlin, who still did some of the promoting for the territory, told me that when Jerry Jarrett saw some footage of the match he said, "You know what? It looks like Jimmy Hart's the one who's been wrestling for two years — not Pat Hutchinson." No one realized how much I loved wrestling. Over the years I'd become such an astute fan that I instantly knew what my role was supposed to be.

Wrestling never quite worked out for Pat Hutchinson. He was never really big enough to get over, or maybe he never caught a big break, but his heart was in the right place. He stayed on for years and years on Saturday TV, getting beat up week after week. He may have never won a match, but he jinxed me. In all these years, my record hasn't been much better.



With my baptism by fire complete, I pretty much hung up my red and black tights and began managing Jerry Lawler in earnest. At that time, most wrestling managers had an all-business look about them. There was Sol Weingroff, who managed Kurt and Karl Von Brauner, and Homer O'Dell, who managed Bronco Lubich and Aldo Bogue. Both of those guys dressed up in formal attire. Dr. Ken Ramey managed the Interns wearing a white suit.

Lawler's first manager had been Sam White, a guy whose ring name was Sam Bass. He was a sharp dresser, with a Western, but not flashy, look. One night in 1976, he and a couple wrestlers, Pepe Lopez and Frank Hester, were on their way back to Memphis from Nashville. In Dickson, Tennessee, a fiery car wreck cut their lives short. Now, working with Lawler, I guess I was taking over from Sam. Eddie Marlin told me something years later that I'll never forget. It occurred when I'd just started managing Lawler, but he kept it from me for the longest time. He said, "You know, Jimmy, when you were starting out, I looked over and I swore I saw Sam Bass — that he was there to watch the matches. It was the most eerie feeling I've ever had in my life."

Maybe Sam wanted to make sure Lawler was in good hands.

Coming from the world of rock and roll, and being younger than most of the other managers, I knew I needed to cut a different style. I was the first manager to wear really flashy outfits, like the getup with the musical notes. I'd just buy the musical notes and sew them on — that's all I could afford back in the early days. When I got to New York, of course, I moved on to the airbrushed outfits.

Fancy ring-attire does have a downside, as I quickly found



## The Mouth of the South

out. Dutch Mantel, one of the great heels from the Memphis era, tells this story better than I do, and he remembers the incident occurring in Loogootee, Indiana, in a high school gym. He says it was 1982. I still think it must have happened earlier, when I was very green, but the bottom line is the same: it wasn't me but my clothes that my opponents came after.

Actually, it was all part of a plan — up to a point. The match was a battle royale, where a pre-determined number of wrestlers start out in the ring together, and then try to throw each other over the top rope. Once you're over the ropes, you're out of the match. To give the fans a little something extra, Dutch and Steve Keirn and whoever else was in the ring at the time were supposed to start yanking my clothes off. When they finally got me down to my underwear, I would gladly get the heck out of the ring.

Well, in those days the heels were always kept separated from the babyfaces. The heels used one entrance and dressing room, while the babyfaces used another. Back then, they didn't try to kill each other in the ring and then walk to the back through the same door — not like they do now. And the same thing was true outside of the arena. You didn't ride together, you didn't talk together. You didn't eat in the same restaurant together. And you didn't stay at the same hotel. If you did, the fans would know, and start saying, "Man, this is not real!" And then it would kill your business.

So I hadn't been talking to Dutch and Keirn, but I think what really happened on the other side of the room was that all the guys all got together and agreed: "Let's take Jimmy Hart and strip him down naked." Today, Dutch still insists it was a spontaneous thing, that it wasn't planned at all. He maintains



that it just turned into a kind of “shoot,” which is the old wrestling term for a real match, when Keirn starting yanking at my underwear. Whatever the truth of the matter is, once again, I found myself in a fight for my life. This time, I came out the loser — and they stripped me down naked in front of everyone. Luckily, I was able to use my hands to pretty much keep everything covered up.

The crowd got a big laugh. Keirn and Mantel got a big laugh.

A local preacher, however, didn't think it was so funny. He gave a big, fiery sermon the very next Sunday. I guess a naked Jimmy Hart was a threat to the community's moral fiber, because, all of a sudden, professional wrestling was banned from Loogootee, Indiana.

We were on the road six days a week at that time, and we drove everywhere. We did Memphis on Monday nights at the Mid-South Coliseum. Tuesday was Louisville. Wednesday was Evansville, Indiana. Thursday was always a spot show in a small town, once again usually in a high school gym. Friday was Tupelo, Mississippi. Every Saturday morning “Championship Wrestling” would broadcast live from Channel 5 in Memphis, from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., with Lance Russell and Dave Brown doing the announcing. As soon as that was over, we'd drive 200 miles to Nashville for the Saturday night matches at the state fairgrounds. Sunday, we were back home for a much-needed day off. The next day it would start all over again at the Mid-South Coliseum.

Everybody assumes wrestlers lead such a glorious, glamorous life, but it's very, very tough — and it was especially hard back then. We'd all eat and travel together, going up and down the



## The Mouth of the South

road, four or five to a car, staying at a Days Inn or a Budgetel. When we had to drive from Memphis to Louisville, even if we got away right after the matches, we might arrive at four in the morning. We couldn't check in to a hotel, because if we did we'd have to pay for two days — so slept in the car until eight o'clock, when we could finally check in for a one-day deal.

Living like that turned us into a great family. Back then, if your head was busted open, and you didn't have the money to go to the doctor to get stitched up, all the boys would chip in to help you out. Sometimes you didn't bother seeing a doctor at all, and instead, you'd have to put a butterfly bandage over a wound, night after night. Sonny King butterflyed my head after it was busted open one time, and I've still got this big knot to prove it.

That's just the way it was. Your payoff was probably fifty dollars a night — seventy-five if you were lucky. Most of today's stars have real contracts, but in the early days it was pure work-for-hire. You made your money, per show, based on the attendance. Everyone got a percentage of the house, and your cut depended on what your position was on the card — main event, semi-main event, the preliminaries, the money dwindled until you reached the "enhancement" guys. If you made \$500 a week, by the time you paid for gas and lodging and food, you were lucky if you took home \$250 or \$300. And then you raised a family on that. I think the guys who came up in that era have lasted longer in the business, and have had such an impact, because of those sacrifices. Some of the guys, today, come in making huge salaries. Why would they give a damn about anything?

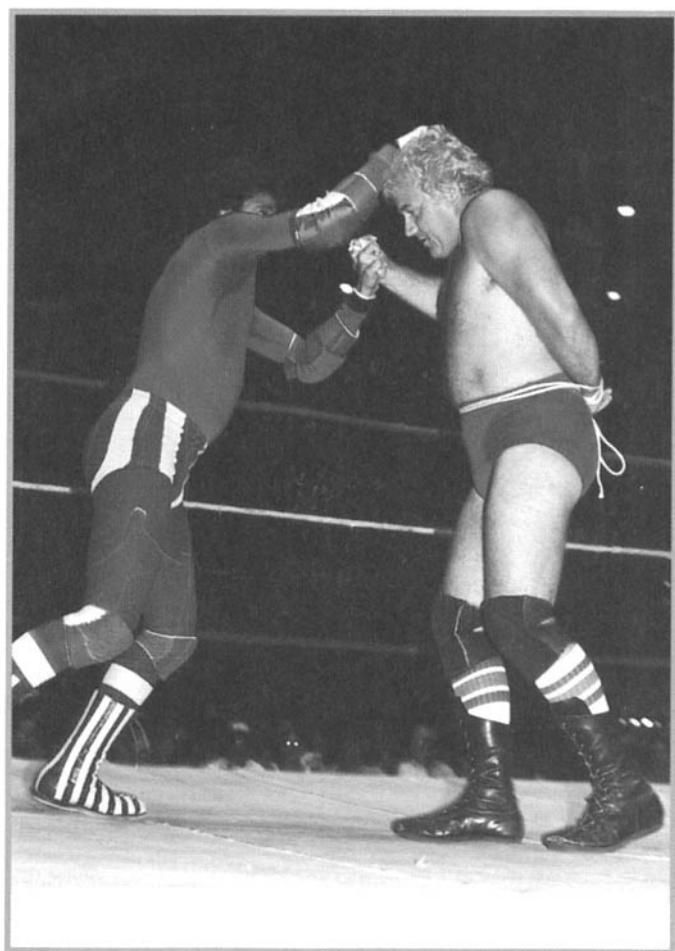
No matter how hard things got, though, I truly loved every



...and his manager, Jimmy Hart

minute of it. I had the greatest job anyone could hope for, managing “The King” of Memphis. Still, it took less than a year for my mouth to get me in trouble, and I was destined to spend the rest of my Memphis years feuding and fighting with the man who had been my first friend in professional wrestling.







## The Southern Handicap Champion

Believe it or not, “The Mouth of the South” was speechless. I was trying to talk, but all that would come out was “Hunh, hunh, hunh.” That’s because my jaw had been broken in three places, and the doctor had wired it shut. And the guy who broke it was my friend, the guy I’d been managing, Jerry Lawler. I guess midgets aren’t the only ones you can’t trust in professional wrestling. With Lawler, I was at the very top: I had inherited the number one managing spot in Memphis Wrestling. Now, I was a bigger heel than he was. I was making “The King” look like the good guy.

This time it was my mouth, and not my music, that took me to the next level.

In 1979 Jerry Lawler was the top heel in the territory. Bill Dundee was the top babyface. Whenever those two met it meant big box office. And I was making a name for myself as



## The Mouth of the South

Lawler's manager, even though I wasn't doing any talking yet.

My big break was a bad break — literally — for Jerry Lawler. Every Saturday and Sunday in the winter months Lawler would play football. I played softball with them in the summer, but I begged off when they switched to football because the tackling was intense, and I didn't want to get hurt. In one of these games, Jerry Calhoun, who was one of Memphis Wrestling's referees, hit Lawler awkwardly and shattered his leg. It wasn't long before my phone rang: it was Bill Dundee and Jerry Jarrett. They asked me if I had been playing football that weekend, and I told them that I hadn't. They said Lawler had broken his leg. I said, "Yeah, I know. I heard about it on the radio and saw it on TV." In that area, the news was as big it gets.

At that moment I felt just like I had when Larry Raspberry, the musical backbone of the Gentrys, told me he was leaving the group. Now Jerry Lawler, who my entire life in professional wrestling was tied to, had suffered a career-threatening injury. It was horrible, what they call a green-tree break — the kind that takes forever to heal. In all likelihood, Lawler wouldn't be able to wrestle for at least a year and a half.

But I wasn't half as worried as Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler. Back then all the territories featured only four or five top stars, and they were the ones who drew the fans. It was like a weekly soap opera — you know how some women watch soap operas every day, and live and die by what happens to the characters? Well, it was the same thing with wrestling. Every week, people lived and died by what happened to Jerry Lawler and Bill Dundee. And then, suddenly, the top star was out of commission. For the first time Bill Dundee was without a credible opponent.



Unless something happened fast, people were going to stop watching.

Jarrett already had a plan. He told me, "We're fixing to make you the top man in Memphis. You're going to be the new king. We're going to build everything around you. From now on you're going to manage the Who's Who of professional wrestling. If we don't get this thing going, we're gonna starve to death."

I'll never forget it. We were in Louisville, Kentucky, and there was snow on the ground. In the hotel room there was Jerry Jarrett, myself, Lance Russell and Jimmy Valiant. We'd rearranged the furniture, taking the mattress off the bed to make more room. We went over Jimmy Hart's new character. A speech was worked out for me, what I was going to say on TV on Saturday. For the first time Jimmy Hart was going to be doing all the talking. A new era in professional wrestling was going to begin.

I was freaked out, but I held everything together. Our creative meeting took place on a Tuesday night. The following Saturday I was at the TV station, ready for my big moment. Lance Russell brought me out and said, "Whatever you think of Jerry Lawler, he was one of the biggest stars we've had here, one of the biggest stars in the world of professional wrestling. And now he's in the Baptist Hospital with a broken leg. We don't know if he's ever going to wrestle again, but we're going to bring out his manager and confidant Jimmy Hart, right now. And hopefully we'll get a few words out of Jimmy Hart."

As I walked before the Channel 5 cameras that morning, sweat dripped off my face — I think I'd changed my underwear



## The Mouth of the South

three times before I got out there. And then I said the words that eventually broke my jaw.

“Lance Russell, what do you do when a horse breaks his leg? Baby, you shoot him!”

Well, brother, talk about turning points and life-altering moments. Those words were heard around the world of Memphis Wrestling — especially up there in Baptist Hospital, where Jerry Lawler watched TV, immobilized with a broken leg.

“Heat” is the wrestling term for all the feuding and dirty tricks and taunting — all the stuff that makes the fans want to spend money to see a face beat a heel. Well, from the moment I said they ought to shoot Jerry Lawler, all the heat in Memphis Wrestling was focused on me.

The next thing I did to stir up Lawler and the fans was to give away his title. I went on TV and said, “Today, we’re going to crown a new King of Memphis. It’s either going to be Paul Ellering, Ali Hussan or Handsome Jimmy Valiant.” I had just formed what was known as the First Family, and was managing all three of them. So when the time came, I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m going to introduce you now to the new King of Memphis, the new King of professional wrestling.” They played some ceremonial music, and I said, “It’s gonna be Paul Ellering!”

People started to boo, loudly, because they wanted Handsome Jimmy Valiant. The people still loved him. So Valiant comes out and goes, “Jim Bowie, Jim Bowie . . .” — that’s what he called me. Anyway, the idea was that Valiant was supposed to be talking with me privately, but I had been wearing a microphone, and it was still on. So everyone could hear him.



## The Southern Handicap Champion

And then Valiant says, "Jimmy, how about Handsome Jimbo from Mempho?"

I responded: "Handsome, don't worry about it. We've got to build confidence up in Paul Ellering. Everybody knows you're the real King." Again, I was speaking like it was just the two of us. But everything was broadcast. I explained further, "Paul Ellering is going to be the king — but just the king for the day."

So Valiant says, "Okay, Jimbo from Mempho. I'll be back in a short time-o," and then he heads to the back.

Later, there's a match. Bill Dundee's in the ring. Ali Hussan and Paul Ellering grab him. I take my belt off and start whipping Dundee. Out from the back comes Handsome Jimmy and I go, "Jimbo, get you some, baby!"

"Don't worry," he says. And then he gets the strap from me and starts whipping *me*, and then he starts whipping Ellering, whipping Ali Hussan. Like I said, people already loved Jimmy Valiant, but when he turned on us he became even more of a fan favorite. He tagged up with Bill Dundee, who really hadn't had anybody to fight since Lawler broke his leg, and I brought in all kinds of guys to battle them. We were off and running with a great feud. It packed houses for the next year, until Lawler's return. The territory was on fire.

Lawler made his big comeback in 1980, after just thirteen months away from the ring. And that's when our feud really started. He was outside on the concrete, still on crutches, when he attacked me for what I'd said about him. He threw a great punch from the floor — and shattered my jaw. The next thing you know, "The Mouth of the South" was wired shut. When I managed to ask him about hitting me so hard, he said he was



## The Mouth of the South

rusty from being out of the ring — so maybe it was an accident. Anyway, I took him at his word. Needless to say, people loved seeing me silenced.

To protect myself from further assault, I created my own title — I became the Southern Handicap Champion. I even had a Handicap belt made. It was a blue, with a big old buckle on the front, with words that read “Southern Handicap Champion.” In the center of the buckle was a picture of me, smiling.

When I could finally speak again, I went on TV and told the fans the story behind the title. “You’re probably wondering how I got this Handicap belt,” I said. “Well, when I was a little bitty Jimmy Hart in Jackson, Mississippi, I was laying on the couch and I became so sick they rushed me to the hospital. And when I got to the hospital, the doctors told my mother, ‘We don’t know if little Jimmy’s going to make it.’ And all that day it was nip and it was tuck, it was tuck and it was nip. It was nip and tuck all day . . .”

It was actually a true story, at least to a point. I really had become quite sick as a kid. At that time there was a big polio scare, and I began to exhibit all the symptoms. But, of course, I embellished things — just a bit.

“My temperature was 150 degrees, and the doctor came up to my mother and said, ‘Mrs. Hart I don’t think little Jimmy’s going to pull through.’ Then the doctor looked at me and said, ‘He’s such a little champion.’ And just then, my fever began to break . . . When I pulled through, from that very moment, it came to me: I *am* the Southern Handicap Champion.”

In my mind, I’d been the Handicap Champ since my match with Pat Hutchinson. Who wouldn’t agree? The guy had been



## The Southern Handicap Champion

wrestling for years, and I'd just been singing, doing music. Subsequently, with me weighing about a buck and a half and really not being able to participate as a physical equal, every time I stepped into the ring I was in was a handicap match.

It didn't take me long to figure out that I could do a lot better if my opponent was handicapped, instead of me. So I began to make sure that I always had a partner in the ring with me, to fight two-on-one, or else an opponent had to agree to fight me with a hand tied behind their back or with oversized boxing gloves on. I remember fighting J.J. Dillon once, and the stipulation was that he had to have both hands tied behind his back. And he still beat me!

Eventually, I had a handicap match with Jerry Lawler, and it drew one of the biggest crowds we ever had at the Mid-South Coliseum. Actually, it was both a handicap match and a "Dream" match. My dream was to get Jerry Lawler in the ring with the Southern Heavyweight Championship belt on the line, and with two members of the First Family, Kevin Sullivan and Wayne Ferris (who later to become the Honky Tonk Man) as special referees. As the match began another member of the First Family, Gypsy Joe, attacked Lawler. And then I entered the ring. Lawler, of course, had one hand tied behind his back. My guys forced him to the mat. I pinned him and was declared the Southern Heavyweight Champion by my own referees. I'd earned my second victory. When we came back the next week, Lawler got his rematch. And he had me on his terms. He promised he was going to break my leg — so we had another sellout crowd. I lost the title, of course, but he didn't break my leg. And, no matter what, I was still the Southern Handicap Champion.



## The Mouth of the South

I did break my hand in a match with Lawler. The worst thing about it was not that I broke it, but that I couldn't put it in a cast for a week. The way our television was scheduled, we did our TV show in Memphis on a Saturday, but it didn't air in Louisville until a week later. So when I broke my hand on a Monday night in Memphis, I couldn't show up in Louisville the next night with a cast because the local audience would see the TV show we'd done the previous Saturday, where my hand was fine. It just wouldn't have made any sense — and people would have figured things out. So I had to wait a week before I could get fixed up.

It sounds horrible now, but that's the way it was. You just had to gut it out. Back then, only the strong survived. Things are very different today. Some guys start with a hundred-thousand-dollar salary, guaranteed, right off the bat. And then they might get five hundred dollars a night to go on the road, their rooms paid for. For some, their cars are paid for. But in the late 70s and early 80s, if you didn't work, you didn't make money.

Many wrestlers have “come clean” about the “work” in print and on TV in recent years, and people know, now, that the goal in wrestling is to put on a show without actually hurting your opponent. Still, things don't always go according to plan. There have been many close calls and some real tragedies. Owen Hart almost broke Steve Austin's neck with a piledriver that was a little off, and Owen himself died when a harness opened up at the wrong time and dropped him 80 feet into the ring.

I've incurred numerous injuries myself — some of them very painful and some that took a long time to heal, if they healed at all. But the only time I thought I was going to die



## The Southern Handicap Champion

came in a match with one of the nicest men in the business — Andre the Giant. The big guy liked to come to the building early, hours before his match was scheduled, and play cards right up until it was time for him to go on. He just loved the atmosphere. And like I said, he was truly a great guy. On the other hand, he did almost kill me.

Andre had come down to our territory for a match in Evansville. It was a handicap tag match, with Koko B. Ware and me fighting Andre and Lawler. For the finish, Andre was supposed to push me down and then sit on me. Andre would always pin his opponent close to ropes, because as big as he was, he had to be able to grab onto something to pull himself back to his feet. Well, the ropes that night were so loose that when Andre tried to pull himself back up, they'd just give. And the more he struggled, the more he pulled, the more his weight was transferred, down, upon me. And the more the breath left my body, the less breath I had to try to tell him he was about to kill me. My head looked like a tomato, it was so red. At one point I actually thought, *Buddy, this is it*. In Evansville, Indiana, in front of a thousand people — which was a sellout back then — both my career and my life are definitely going to end. As it turned out, I didn't die — but I did have some cracked ribs. I was on a soup and banana pudding diet for the next three weeks.

We did all kinds of things in Memphis that the bigger organizations later picked up on — like bringing wrestlers down from the ceiling. Jerry Lawler would put on his cape and his crown and come down on a trapeze swing. And he was one of, if not the first contemporary wrestler to choreograph his entrance with music. When Hulk Hogan was just starting out,



## The Mouth of the South

he'd come to the ring riding a big horse. We had ladder matches, tar-and-feather matches, scaffold matches and paint matches. We had lumberjack matches, where all the wrestlers not involved in a match would stand ringside: their job was to throw you back into the ring if you tried to escape. We had stretcher matches, where the loser was the guy who was hurt so bad he had to be carried out on a stretcher. One of the big fan favorites was the hair match, where the loser gets his head shaved.

Jerry Jarrett once tried to get me to do a hair match with Lawler. He called me to pitch the idea. "I think it would be a big house," he said. "I'd like to see how much money it would take for you to do it."

I said, "I'll do it free."

"Do it for *free*?"

"Yeah, I'll tell you what. I'd be more than happy to do a hair match with Lawler — if he loses his hair first. Then you can cut my hair the next week."

There was a long silence. I knew Jerry Lawler wasn't going to cut his hair. But Jarrett said he'd talk to Lawler. When he called back he said, "Lawler ain't putting his hair up. But we need you to do your hair. If you lose the match and your head is shaved, we're going to send you up north and get you fitted for this outfit like KISS and bring you down from the top of the roof every night."

And I said, "Thank you, but no thank you. You don't have to send me anywhere. I think I'll go up to New York myself, and talk to all them about managing."

Just the mention of New York put a halt to Jarrett's plan. Up in New York, Vince McMahon was getting national exposure



with his World Wrestling Federation, and the guys running the territories were beginning to get scared. Jarrett said, "Drop it, we don't want you going anywhere." So I never had that hair match — although I did eventually make it to New York . . .

One of my favorite gimmick matches of all time was a dog-food match. The loser, simply, had to eat dog food. And since I've already said that I rarely won a match after battling Pat Hutchinson, you can guess how this story ends. It was Bobby Eaton and me against Koko B. Ware and Stan Lane. I had no intention of eating real dog food, of course, and Lawler had the solution: "Why don't y'all just get a can of chili and steam the labels off? Y'all can eat chili, can't you?"

I went, "Oh, yeah."

So I went out and got two cans of chili and two cans of dog food, and I took the labels off the dog food and put them around the cans of chili. After I fixed the cans up, I made sure to keep the fake dog food "hidden" in my bag. I'd been around long enough and I didn't want anyone switching the cans back to real dog food. For wrestlers, the temptation that kind of prank presented was just too great. Anyway, that night I had to go out to manage another match, and sure enough, when I came back, I realized that the can had been switched.

Lawler and his buddies think they're really smart, right? They've pulled one over on little Jimmy Hart.

But no one realized I had the second can of chili stashed elsewhere as insurance.

So we get in the ring and start the match. All the boys have stuck around for main event. They're watching, because they think I'm going to be forced to eat real dog food. There was no avoiding it — that's what people had paid to see. And if we didn't go



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through with it they'd burn the Coliseum down. Anyway, me and Bobby are out there, about to lose. Lawler and the guys think they've swerved us, but I've swerved them right back.

After Bobby and I lost, Lance Russell comes out and opens up the can. Now everyone, wrestlers and fans alike, think it's dog food. Eaton and I were the only ones who knew we were eating chili. But it was so cold it might as well have been dog food. The chili was so bad we gagged ourselves silly. We both threw up in the middle of the ring.

As I've said, back then you never dreamed of weaseling out of a stipulation. I learned the consequences of trying to, the hard way, while I was still managing Lawler. It was a hair match again, and Lawler had put his up against Jimmy Valiant's. Lawler made the challenge: no time limit, no disqualification, and the loser's hair will be cut.

There's no way out of something like that. You either beat Handsome Jimmy or you don't. Well, Valiant was over, and had the crowd on his side. But when he came out to the ring on crutches, saying, "Brother, brother, Handsome Jimmy, in the airport, slipped on a piece of ice," and "I can't wrestle," people would have none of it. They started booing and throwing stuff. Lawler and Valiant knew they couldn't end things that way — that their feud would have been killed — so the match had to take place. Quickly, Valiant jumped Lawler and took a crutch to him. Lawler managed to blade, cutting his own arms and everything so it looked like the crutch was tearing him up. Blood was everywhere. He wore an oozing, crimson mask.

The thinking was that Valiant's attack would make people forget about the hair stipulation. That seeing Lawler blindsided before the bell, watching him get attacked so brutally with a



crutch, and seeing him covered in blood and carted off in an ambulance, that people would go, “Oh, man, he’s suffered enough. We don’t want to see him get his hair cut.”

Wrong.

The crowd went absolutely crazy. They burned some of the Coliseum’s seats. They knocked out some of the doors. On Saturday, at the Channel 5 show, they carried picket signs.

“We were ripped off!”

“We were robbed!”

It was a hell of a mess.

When Christmas came to Memphis Wrestling, we’d bring in novelty acts for the kids — more family-oriented programming — especially female wrestlers and midgets. Probably the most famous woman wrestler of all time was The Fabulous Moolah, or Slave Girl Moolah, as she was called in her early years, and she was always a big draw. Wendi Richter also came through Tennessee, and she went on to become the women’s champion in the WWF, where she successfully defended her world title during the first WrestleMania. I was there when Moolah defended the same title at Wrestlemania II.

As I’ve already mentioned, I’m partial to the old wrestling saying *Never trust a midget*. Once again, I learned my lesson the hard way: truer words were never spoken. It happened during a men’s mixed midget match. Lawler and his midget were squaring off against me and my little guy. The midgets, I believe, were Little Tokyo and Little Beaver. There was a spot in the match where Lawler was on his knees while my midget was holding him from behind. I jumped in the ring to throw powder in Lawler’s face. But when I did, he ducked — which was supposed to happen — and I temporarily blinded my partner instead. So,



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during the next spot, of course, my midget's supposed to play like he can't see, stumbling around the ring. And then he's supposed to bite Lawler on the butt. Well, somehow or other, I guess his face was real wet with sweat, the powder really was caked over his eyes, and he *really* couldn't see. Lawler had me in a front face lock, my rear end completely exposed. And then my own midget turned around and bit me on the butt. In fact, he bit me so hard I had to get a tetanus shot. True story.

And that's why I always say, "Never trust a midget."

Any time our territory needed a little gusto, we'd call up Nashville and bring in Jackie Fargo, one of the all-time biggest names in southern territory history, and by that time a living legend. I remember the first time he came in to work with us; I went on TV and used all the old one-liners to cut him down. First I said, "The only thing holding Jackie Fargo up are his varicose veins." And then I said, "His wife is so ugly she has to sneak up on a mirror to put her makeup on." And boy, the audience laughed and laughed and laughed.

The following Monday I was scheduled to be in a handicap match against Fargo. Old Jackie came up to me and he went, "Pally, saw that interview."

I was all smiles, from ear to ear.

And then he goes, "I liked it."

I responded, in a real over-polite little boy voice, "Glad you liked it, Mr. Fargo." Of course, I was some distance away from him at the time.

But then he said, ominously, "I can't wait to see you in the ring tonight."

I was less confident when I answered, "I can't wait either, Mr. Fargo."



Buddy, when he got me in that ring, it took about three seconds before I looked like a pretzel. I mean, I didn't know if I was coming or going. I could barely breathe. And that's when he whispered, "Pally, remember two things. Never say anybody's old, and never say anybody's fat." So I learned another valuable lesson. No matter how things might appear, and no matter what you might really believe, never take anything for granted and always do everything you can to put your opponent over. Because if you go out there and say a guy's old, or fat, or that he can't wrestle anymore, and then you get beat ... Well, you kill yourself off, too.

After the match, Fargo gave me another piece of advice "Kid," he said, "remember. Age and experience will always overcome youth and enthusiasm." And I've never forgotten that.

Jackie and his brother had had a tag team called the Fabulous Ones; later, Steve Keirn came to Memphis and tagged with Stan Lane as the new Fabulous Ones, with Fargo managing. Not to be outdone, I put together a group called the New York Dolls with Troy Graham — who also wrestled under a mask as the Dream Machine — and Rick McGraw. We made fun of Fargo's guys — you might say we out-fabuloused the Fabulous Ones. We dressed in white top hats and white tails, and carried white canes.

The Moon Dogs were polar opposites, a tag team that took the term "heel" to new levels. They carried these huge bones everywhere they went, and Lance Russell told the audience that they came from a dinosaur. Their matches were always very tough, among the most brutal I remember, and they became famous for turning anything — garbage cans, tables and those bones — into weapons. The Moon Dogs were hardcore before



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anyone had ever heard the term. Fans loved their matches, because they'd battle all over the building. Some wrestlers, however, might have felt differently. The day after fighting the Moon Dogs you were in pretty rough shape. They beat up Jackie Fargo so bad once that I was literally begging the referee to stop the match.

When it became obvious how much the fans were into hating me, the territory tried to build on my success. We brought in a new manager, a guy who was even more of a wimp than Jimmy Hart. Jimmy Cornett was our ringside photographer in Nashville. And just like me in my days with the Gentrys, he was a huge fan. I believe it was in 1982 when they decided to include him in storylines, bringing him out as this spoiled-brat rich kid character. He'd wear a yachting cap, a blue blazer and white pants, and he'd whine and snivel about how much money his mother had paid for the wrestlers he managed. I gave him knee and elbow pads and everything else, and showed him a few tricks of the trade. Of course we had a couple of matches where we tagged up together against Lawler — how could we resist? Eventually, our territory had expanded to where we just had too much talent — Cornett took some of the guys with him to Louisiana and helped form a new organization there.

There were more than a few fans, however, unfortunately, who did not love to hate me. No, those folks just plain hated me. Some kids in Memphis despised me so much that they'd take it out on my son, Jimmy Jr. When he was in the third grade a couple of them pushed him off a slide, knocking out a few of his teeth. Our mailbox was knocked down every week. And the house would get plastered with toilet paper, eggs,



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paint, everything. One Saturday I was on TV, working with The Sheik, who was a real Iranian, and I was making inflammatory, un-American comments: a guy whose son had been killed in the Middle East came down to the station, furious. He wanted to kill me.

Sometimes the fans were sneaky. One night in the Louisville Gardens, on the way to the back after a handicap match that pitted me and Jimmy Valiant against Lawler, someone in the crowd went further than usual. I was used to the beer they were throwing at us, and the feeling of spit landing on me. What I wasn't used to was the burning sensation that spread through my butt. I tugged at my tights, thinking, damn, someone burned with their cigarette. When we got to the back I asked one of the guys if he could see a burn mark.

He said, "Oh, my God, Jimmy! Bend over." And then he pulled out a homemade dart. Somebody had taken a needle and threaded it with a little piece of shoestring — I'd been shot in the butt with a homemade blowgun. Security grabbed the culprit later on, red-handed, with a peashooter. The medic treating me used turpentine as an antiseptic. I was worried that the guy might have dipped the needle in some kind of poison.

A fan also gave me one of my worst injuries, although he probably didn't intend for it to happen. We were in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and I was working another handicap match. Bill Dundee was fighting me with one hand tied behind his back, and he was chasing me around the ring. As I jumped out of the ring to run away, with Dundee still chasing me, a fan on the front row wearing cowboy boots kicked out his leg as I went by. His timing was so precise that the toe of his boot slammed



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and then gouged into the back of my calf. I didn't know what had happened — except that I decelerated from 80 mph to zero almost instantly. The muscle had basically exploded. With your calf muscle torn, you're pretty much a gimp, so I came to screeching halt. But I still had to roll back into the ring and finish the match — Dundee had to pin me. I don't remember how I managed to hobble to the back. It was a bad, bad injury.

One of my worst fan experiences started with a guy pushing me at ringside — and ended up in court. We were in Milan, Tennessee, in 1984, and at that time I had the First Family of Professional Wrestling — King Kong Bundy, Phil Hickerson, a guy named Ralph Derryberry, who we called The Animal (no, not George “The Animal” Steele), and Masao Ito, who was from Japan. We had an eight-match card scheduled that night. Eddie Marlin was the promoter, but the whole thing was sponsored by the local fire department, and we had a real good crowd.

Before the show started Mr. and Mrs. Coffey, who always sold our programs and merchandise up at the front, came up to the boys and said, “Man, there's a jerk up front, a body builder from Nashville who wants to break into the wrestling business. He's been up here, worrying us to death.”

Eddie Marlin decided he'd better have a talk with him. “Look, pal,” he said, “you just can't walk into the dressing rooms. If you want to get into professional wrestling there's a school you can go to.” And Eddie gave him the information.

So we didn't think much more about it until the matches were underway. I was squaring off against Tojo Yammamoto, and I was wearing a karate outfit on — a black robe, with red knee pads and matching tennis shoes. That match ended pretty



quickly. Tojo stepped into the ring, struck a real karate stance, and then let loose the fierce Japanese scream he was famous for. I grabbed my heart and fainted — that that was the finish. One! Two! Three! The stretcher carried me off.

Later, I had to come back out to manage a tag match. There wasn't time to change, so I was still wearing my karate getup. As this match began, I noticed that the guy who had been causing problems earlier — I found out after the fact that he was the current Mr. Tennessee of bodybuilding — was ringside. During the match I heard a commotion behind me. I turned around. This guy had his shirt off and was doing body-builder poses for the audience, not facing the ring, but the crowd. I got up on a chair that was by the ring, and I did the Atlas-thing, mimicking him. Then I jumped back down. Folks laughed. He turned then, but didn't figure out why people were laughing. So once more he faced "his" audience. Of course, at that moment, I got back up again, making fun of him with more muscle-head poses and stuff.

This time he caught me. Back then, there were no steel railings or fences to keep the crowd away from the ring, just a little makeshift rope barrier. Still, it was a line that the fans knew they weren't supposed to cross. Next thing you know, this guy came across that rope, grabbed me and screamed, "Hey, smartass!" And then he pushed me down. Which was no problem, really — it didn't hurt. Still, it was a big mistake.

Immediately, Masao Ito jumped out of the ring. Phil Hickerson came out from the back. And so did Bundy and Ralph Derryberry. All of my guys were really loyal. In those days, whoever you traveled with or whoever you worked with, were always there to help. Especially if you were their



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manager — because the fans truly believed in what we did, and the manager carried most of the heat in the matches. You have to remember how scary these guys really were. You would never think of hitting a wrestler, but a manager often seemed like fair game — we were always small, and weak. I played the role to the hilt, like I really couldn't beat even the weakest attacker. And the truth was I probably couldn't.

Once my guys arrived, I jumped up on the ring apron. A couple cops separated everybody, and I thought it was over. I wasn't part of the main event that night so Masao Ito and I got in the car and headed back to Memphis. Well, the next morning Eddie Marlin came up to me with the news: "Jimmy, that guy swore out a warrant against you last night."

I said, "What for?"

"All of y'all jumped on him and beat him up."

"What? I didn't even touch the guy."

"I know it," he said, "but it looks like we're gonna have a court case to prove it. They filed charges against Bundy and all of them last night before they left the building."

Evidently the guy was living with a lawyer, so he thought it was his big chance — that he could make the news and get himself into professional wrestling.

That night we hit the road for a show in Nashville. Along the way, we stopped in Milan, which is a little north of Jackson, and put up a hundred-dollar bond. Milan is a really small town. We had to go to a lady's house to get the bond certified. She was picking butterbeans out in the field, and they had to call her in. With the bond posted a court date was set.

We got a lawyer in Nashville, and he really thought things looked bad. He told us, "If all this is true, the guy's going to be



able to file for personal damages, and y'all will probably have to do some time, too." We were looking at six months of labor — probably picking up trash on the highway between Jackson and Nashville.

So I launched my own investigation. I went back to Milan and found the fire department people who had worked security. I remembered that one of the firemen had been taking pictures, and when I found him he showed me the prints. One of the photos showed the fight on the floor, and it was clear that Bundy was the only one who got near the guy. The picture also showed the ring apron: and on that apron, as plain as day, was a pair of red tennis shoes. Above those shoes? Black karate pants and red knee pads. The picture cut me off at the waist, but there was no doubt it was me. I took the photograph to my lawyer, got my karate outfit together, and we headed down to the courthouse.

It was a scene straight out of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The courthouse was in the town square and, with all the publicity, that day they had about 800 people gathered. Inside, it was standing room only. They actually had cotton candy machines out front, popcorn machines, and a guy selling Coca-Cola. It was unreal.

Anyway, the proceedings began with the judge asking all of us the same thing: "Guilty or not guilty?" I was the last one to respond, and I sang out, "Noooooot guilty!" Of course, it made everybody laugh, and the judge, angry, took us all into the back. He lectured everybody about keeping things perfectly straight. The atmosphere was already wild enough, with all the wrestling fans present — he didn't want us making it even more of a circus. The trial progressed. Finally, it was my turn on the stand. I was asked for my side of the events.



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"Well," I said, "the guy grabbed me and he pushed me down. And the only thing I could see was the lights in the ceiling above as my life was flashing before my eyes." Once more, everyone laughed. The judge slammed his gavel: "Order in the court! Order in the court!"

The prosecutor got up and said, "Your Honor, Jimmy Hart thinks he's Bob Hope on a USO tour." More laughter.

The judge barked, "Any more outbursts like this and there's gonna be fines levied."

Finally, our lawyer got the kid who claimed we beat him up on the stand. He said, "So, you maintain that King Kong Bundy was holding you, Masio Ito was chopping you, Jimmy Hart was kicking and slapping you, and Phil 'the Animal' Dingleberry had a wrestling hold on you? That's over a thousand-something pounds on top of you — and you don't even have any bruises? My, my. And you say Jimmy Hart was the real culprit? He was the one who was really hitting you the most?"

"Yes, he was."

"You swear on a Bible that Jimmy Hart was kicking you and biting you?"

"Yes, yes I do."

"Okay, this is Exhibit A. Is this the karate outfit Mr. Hart was wearing that night?"

"Yes, sir. That was the outfit."

"And these were his tennis shoes?"

"Yes."

"So, you swear this is what Mr. Hart was wearing?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"And Mr. Hart was kicking you?"



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Our lawyer had led the lamb to the slaughter. At that moment he had the judge look at the photos showing me on the ring apron, nowhere near the action on the floor. He threw the whole thing out of court.

It had been a close call, and a state law that said you could not disrupt a sporting event had clearly helped our case. The law probably on the books to keep people from running onto the field during baseball and football games, but back then wrestling was considered a sporting event.

The low point for my Memphis managerial career occurred in the early '80s, when Lawler came back and made my life miserable. I was putting up everything I had, anybody I could find, to defeat him. At one point I was managing Austin Idol, and the only thing I had left to entice Lawler into a match was my gold record from the Gentrys. Lawler said, "Okay, I'll fight Austin Idol for your gold album, but if I win I'm going to take it to the Mississippi Bridge and throw it off." He beat Austin Idol, and we had a crowd of about 2500 people the next morning to watch him throw my gold record off the bridge.

Eventually, he beat all my wrestlers. The Nightmares — Ken Wayne and Danny Davis — were unmasked. Kevin Sullivan left town along with Wayne Farris. Chick Donovan had his knee torn up. The First Family was in disarray. When Lawler beat the last of my stable, Gypsy Joe and the Angel, in a loser-leave-town match, I went before the TV audience with tears in my eyes. I said, "That's it. All my wrestlers are gone. I'm retiring."

But of course, I didn't really mean it. I came back the next week and said, "Am I just going to give up? Never! I'm starting a new First Family." So I imported Buggy McGraw and El Toro and The Turk, and we started the whole feud all over again.



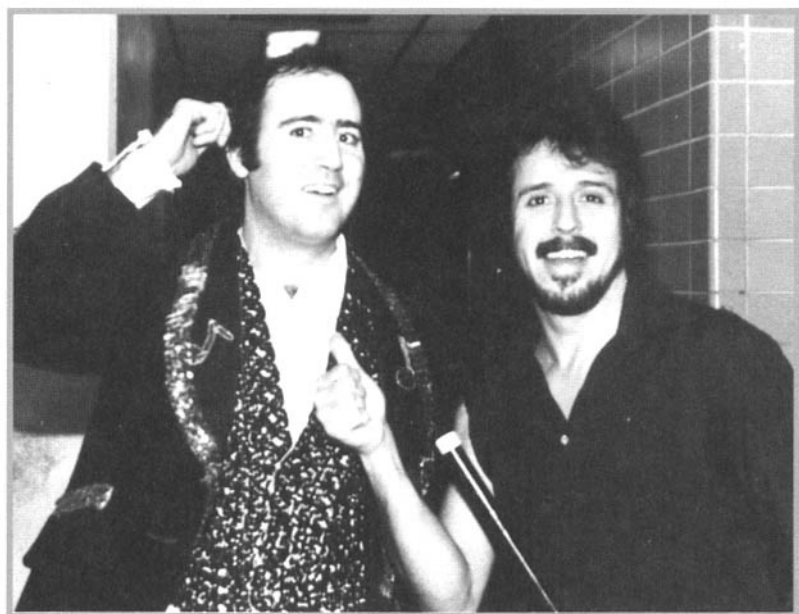
## **The Mouth of the South**

My war with Jerry Lawler made wrestling more popular than ever in the Memphis territories. And then, in 1982, the eyes of the world — not just wrestling fans, but the entire entertainment world — were focused on the Lawler-Hart feud. At the center of all that attention was an unlikely grappler who, like me, had created his own title. He was the Inter-Gender Champion, Andy “I’m from Hollywood” Kaufman.



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# Andy "I'm From Hollywood" Kaufman

In Jerry Lawler's recurring nightmare "The Mouth of the South" wears a mask. "The King" chases him — his sworn enemy — in a never-ending circle, around a ring. Week after week after, match after match. Finally, his prey can no longer avoid capture; Lawler rips off the mask. To his horror, the man he discovers is not Jimmy Hart. It's an even worse nemesis — Andy Kaufman.

But Lawler knows, that was no nightmare: just another night of Memphis Wrestling.

Andy Kaufman was a big star, of course, before he ever set foot in a ring. His surreal, oddball comedy routines were a huge mid-70s and early '80s hit on "Saturday Night Live." And then in 1978 he landed a starring role as the wacky, immigrant mechanic Latka Gravas on the TV series "Taxi." In 1982, mud wrestling was a hot ticket in some nightclubs, and Andy, keenly



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aware of new trends in popular culture, was inspired. He appeared on “Saturday Night Live” dressed in what looked like longjohns covered with pair of boxer shorts, and he wrestled a woman. He described it as inter-gender wrestling and declared himself the Inter-Gender Champion.

Well, for Andy Kaufman it was more than just a skit. He loved professional wrestling, and was serious about getting into it in some fashion. In New York he hooked up with Bill Apter, who’s best known for his role in editing many of the wrestling magazines that have been on the stands for the last couple of decades. Apter introduced him to Vince McMahon of the World Wrestling Federation, but at the time, Vince didn’t want to anything to do with the kind of comedic spectacle Andy had in mind. Remember, this was before anyone called wrestling “sports entertainment” — it was still a very, very serious business. So Bill Apter put in a call to Memphis. Lawler said, “My gosh! Fabulous! Here’s a guy from ‘Taxi,’ a guy with hit TV show, and he wants to come down to Memphis to be in professional wrestling? Absolutely. Tell him to come on down!”

Lawler immediately talked to me about his plans. Jerry Jarrett pretty much had a hand in all aspects of the business, but sometimes he’d burn out, overloaded with trying to keep everything running smoothly. When that happened, Lawler would take over the booking. Basically, they’d trade back and forth every four or five months. When Lawler was doing the booking, I would help him. So when Lawler told me about Andy Kaufman, I said, “Oh, my God, this is great!” I was a big fan of “Taxi” and I was hoping Andy and I would get to do some stuff together.

In Memphis for the first time, Andy appeared in an inter-gender match, where four women, picked from the crowd,



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would be his opponents. Lawler was introduced into the angle immediately, to begin their feud. The idea was straightforward: Lawler was upset because Andy was making fun of professional wrestling. To punish the comedian, Lawler set him up, putting a "ringer" who could really wrestle into the mix. Before the match began Andy made a promise: if he couldn't beat any one of the women within a certain time limit, he would marry her. Of course, that wasn't going to happen . . .

The ringer, a woman named Foxy, almost beat Kaufman. Andy, flustered, agreed to a rematch. Lawler came out and "volunteered" to train Foxy, saying he'd be in her corner for her next meeting with Kaufman. Once again, Foxy took him to the limit. This made Andy furious, and when he finally, barely, won the match, he rubbed Foxy's face into the mat. When Lawler entered the ring, Andy started screaming in Lawler's face, spit flying everywhere. That's when Lawler pushed him. Andy said, "I'm from Hollywood and I'll sue you! I'll sue everybody here." Then, unimpressed, Lawler challenged him to a match; he was going to teach him a lesson. We were off and running.

Over the next few weeks Andy built up the heat with his "I'm from Hollywood" antics. During a couple of segments taped for our Saturday TV show, he offered hygiene tips for Southerners. He "introduced" men to soap, and to the concept of bathing. He showed women a razor, and explained the concept of shaving your legs.

Andy Kaufman wrestled a man for the first time on April 5, 1982; it wasn't much of a match. Andy spent the first six minutes with his foot outside of the ropes. Finally, Jerry Lawler stepped out of the ring, grabbed a microphone and called Andy an ass. Then, he said he'd let Andy get him in a headlock just to



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get the match rolling. Lawler bent over, and Andy warily applied the headlock. Lawler just straightened up and fell backwards, driving Andy into the mat with a quick suplex. “The King” followed things up with a piledriver — and another to teach Andy what “real” wrestling was all about — and that was it. Andy was carried out on a stretcher, and “spent the next few days” in St. Francis Hospital.

The hospital “confirmed” that the Hollywood star had suffered a neck injury. The press was all over it, and Lawler showed no remorse, telling them that Kaufman deserved it for making fun of professional wrestling. For his part, Andy told reporters that he had assumed that wrestling was phony, but that now he knew different. He vowed never to step foot inside the squared circle again. He even made an appearance on “Saturday Night Live,” wearing one of those collar-type neck braces, to “apologize” to anybody he might have offended.

On July 29, 1982, with his neck still in the brace — Lawler called it a flea collar — Kaufman, along with “The King,” appeared on the Dave Letterman show. And that’s when it happened: the slap heard around the world. While Letterman was interviewing them, the two started arguing. Lawler slapped Andy hard, knocking him out of his chair. Andy got up, threw hot coffee on Lawler, and then ran for his life. When he reached the other side of the set, and was safely standing in the exit doorway, he let loose a tirade of cuss words. A genuinely shocked Letterman stayed out of the way.

For years, no one knew the truth behind the Lawler-Kaufman feud. And that’s why it was Memphis Wrestling at its finest — and probably one of the greatest “works” in the history of professional wrestling. Eighteen years later, Jim Carrey’s *Man*



in the Moon — thanks to Jerry "The King" Lawler — finally "smartened up" the audience. Still, to this day, people wonder: was it real?

Only three people were aware of what was going to happen on the Letterman show, and David Letterman wasn't one of them. Only Andy Kaufman, Lawler and Jimmy Hart knew Andy was going to be slapped. We also knew he was going to throw coffee or water all over Lawler. But what even Jerry and I didn't know was that Andy was going to let loose with a barrage of 18 million profanities, a vicious, blue, verbal assault. The slap wasn't really what caught everyone's eye. I think Andy's swearing, on national TV — which back then that was unheard of — was what truly got the attention of the network, what actually "put it over." If he had just been slapped, the Federal Communications Commission wouldn't have had anything to say. Because swearing was involved, everybody noticed.

The Letterman show hadn't been part of Memphis Wrestling's original plans. Andy had been booked on the show as a comedian — not because he had been wrestling. Few in the straight entertainment world had ever heard of Jerry Lawler. And David Letterman certainly had no clue who "The King" was. You have to remind yourself, wrestling territories were still pretty much a local concern at the time. Tennessee had its wrestling, and so did Arkansas, Florida and Georgia. But we weren't even appearing on the TBS Superstation back then. Jimmy Hart and Jerry Lawler weren't household names in New York or around the rest of the country. I remember talking over Andy's upcoming Letterman appearance with him and Lawler one Monday night in Memphis. The conversation began generally, with Lawler saying that to make the feud truly take



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off, to get some real, national publicity, we needed to get Jerry on the show with Andy. Andy agreed, and set about working out the logistics. He sent some footage to New York to let them know what he was doing, and made calls to the show's producers, saying, "Hey I'm wrestling women. That's what I'm doing down in Tennessee."

And that, as they say, is the way we made television history.

Riding on the national notoriety generated by the Letterman show Andy returned to Memphis to get even with Lawler. I started managing him, because, well, if Andy hated Lawler, and I hated Lawler, and Lawler hated us both . . .

It was a marriage made in heaven. Or, I should say, a marriage made in Memphis.

Andy had done wonderful job cutting promos and giving interviews before he squared off with Lawler, but when he got into the match, he'd spend most of the time standing outside of the ring. Well, no matter how big his star may have been, wrestling fans come to see wrestling. The marquee says "Wrestling" — not "Karate" or "Dancing." In Memphis, especially, the fans expected a lot of bang for their buck. In fact, we had always used a smaller ring than many of the other territories because it led to more, faster-paced action.

Right away Lawler realized we had to get Kaufman more involved. Andy was nervous, and if he was going to be alone in the ring, we were never going to get anywhere. The comic simply didn't know enough about the business of wrestling. Jerry put us together so I could help guide him, to make sure we wouldn't just have somebody out there jumping around. It was my job to watch and take care of him. As a comedian, Andy was truly gifted. He was hilarious, playing around with fans



and stuff like that, but when it came to actually being in the ring, somebody needed to be on the apron to help him, to say, "Grab a headlock." As his manager or tag partner, I'd walk him through everything.

Everybody believes Andy Kaufman was always in character, that nobody ever really knew him, one way or the other. It's true that out in front of the people he worked the gimmick, but behind closed doors he was as real as anyone else. Driving up and down the road to Louisville or Lexington, just the two of us, he was real. And he honestly enjoyed that part of the business, the road, as much as being in the ring. He didn't have an "I'm from Hollywood" attitude, but that was the character he'd bring to life. The man I knew was very humble, and he loved the business as much as any wrestler.

When we were on the road, he'd never stop talking about wrestling. I don't think I ever had the chance to ask him about being in "Taxi" because we were always too busy, always talking about angles and moves. He was always wondering about some guy or gimmick. Questioning always, analyzing everything. He must have asked, "Jimmy, why is it done that way?" about a million different things.

I tried to tell him, "Everything's visual. You don't just play to the people down front. You're playing to the people way up in the stands, too. The people down front can hear you say stuff, which is fine, but the people up top can't. So you've got to kind of pantomime to reach the people up there."

Naturally, Andy was concerned about his well-being in the ring, and worried constantly about getting hurt. I'd always coach him backstage before a match, "Just relax with it. Always relax. Don't try to do anything that you can't do. I'll call it in the ring.



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And Lawler, he's the greatest, he'll lead you. His punches will be fine. But don't try to throw punches yourself if you can't pull them — you'll hurt somebody, or worse, make them mad."

We showed him how to take bumps so he wouldn't get injured, and he always went over matches with me ahead of time. He'd ask, "Jimmy, now what do I do? What side of the ring are we going to be on?" That sort of thing. Absolutely everything was pre-planned. We told him what we wanted to do with him, and understood his limitations, that he was capable of only three or four different spots. Before a match he'd always meditate. I'd leave him alone for about 30 minutes and he'd run through what we were about to do in his head. And then, before we'd hit the ring, I'd go over everything one last time.

Andy had his own ideas, too, which meant I had the difficult job of keeping him under control. He'd say, "Now before I go on I'm gonna do a little song, you know, ad lib, and stuff like that." I'd have to bring him back to reality: "Andy, don't do that stuff for too long, because if you do the fans are gonna get very impatient. It's like church. You go in on Sunday, they have their little song, the preacher talks about what happened in the Sunday school, how many kids are enrolling, you say a prayer, then they take the offering, then there's another song and then the preaching, right? But by 12 o'clock, Andy, those people are ready to get out of that church. They wanna go home and eat, be somewhere else. If someone's preaching until 12:15, people start getting hungry. And they start thinking, 'Oh, my God, football's about to start.' Baby, they're ready to get out of there. And when that happens, Andy, you've lost them."

Pro wrestling is like any other entertainment event, and people pay their hard-earned money expecting to see matches



that run between eight and ten at night. Once you start keeping them there until 11, they become impatient, ready to get up and leave. When Andy stalled a main event for 15 or 20 minutes, you could feel the crowd getting impatient. And that would really hurt the match: people wanted to see Andy and me get our asses kicked and they didn't want to wait minutes for the butt-kicking to begin. So, I was forever trying to rein him in.

I remember one night in Lexington, Kentucky, we were portraying almost precisely what had occurred in the Memphis one-on-one with Lawler. And although it was the two of us teaming up against "The King," the outcome would be the same: Andy was going to be pile-driven. Of course, the minute Andy Kaufman arrived in Lexington there were two or three local TV stations that wanted him to do interviews, especially after what had happened on Letterman. Anyway, during the match Lawler gives Andy the piledriver. Which was reasonable — we weren't worried about the arena crowd, but we didn't want it to hit the news, because we had already done the same finish in Memphis.

Andy was supposed to get pinned, one-two-three, and then I would roll him out of the ring and we'd leave. Well, Lawler's hand is raised, and he leaves the ring. But Andy won't move.

Needing to play things out, I headed to the back. Lawler stops me, "Where's Andy?"

"He's laying in the ring," I say.

"Oh, my God, get him out! Because if they put him in an ambulance and re-create what we did in Memphis everything will be ruined. The whole world's gonna say, 'It's a sham' and we'll lose all the heat."



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Andy, of course, wasn't thinking like a wrestling promoter. He figured he'd just get more publicity.

I marched back out to the ring to explain, "Andy, you've got to get up and go back."

He says, "No, no, the ambulance will take me to the hospital."

I said, "Andy, if you go to the hospital it's gonna hit the newspapers."

"I know it, it'll be great."

"Andy, it won't be great, because it means we will have re-created exactly what we did the last time. People will think that if we're doing it in Memphis, and in Louisville, then we're doing the same thing in Evansville, the same thing in every city, and every town. They'll think we're only doing the one angle. And then they won't care about us."

All he said was, "I think my neck's really hurt."

I went back and told Lawler he still wouldn't get out of the ring.

Jerry said: "You better tell him that if he doesn't get out of that damn ring, right now, then I'm gonna go back and really give him a piledriver."

So back out I went. "Andy, Lawler just wanted me to let you know — either you get out of this damn ring, right now, or he's gonna come back and piledrive you again — for real."

Buddy, Andy was up in a heartbeat. I raised his hand, and we got booed out of the building. When I got him to the back Lawler warned him, "Don't ever, ever, ever try to do the same thing twice."

Andy and I traveled together quite a bit, from Louisville to Lexington, and when we ate at restaurants he'd always pay for his meal and I'd always pay for mine. I guess that was



something New York about him, or Hollywood. Folks would approach us all the time — me because of wrestling, and him because of his stardom. At one Denny's, a lady came up when while we were in the middle of eating and asked for his autograph.

He said, "Ma'am, I'd love to give you my autograph, but if I sign one for you then I'm going to have to sign one for everybody in here. And if I do that, my meal's gonna get cold. So, I really can't — unless you want to pay for my meal."

She left in a huff, saying, "Well! I sure don't want to pay for your meal!"

I told him that while he was involved in Memphis Wrestling he couldn't act that way. In every restaurant we went to after that I made him be extra nice: I didn't want the cooks or the waitresses to spit in our food.

Andy and I worked well together. Adrian Adonis, who I would later manage in the WWE, used to say "Two sticks are harder to break than one," and my work with Kaufman proved that to be true. Let's just say we kept Lawler occupied.

Even so, all good things must come to an end. On the Fourth of July, 1983, we were scheduled to team up on Lawler one more time. At one point in the match, I looked at Andy and said, "On the count of three let's charge him." I counted and charged. Andy didn't. Lawler nailed me. Alright, I thought, I'll give Andy the benefit of the doubt. I came back to the corner and said, "Okay, maybe you misunderstood. On the count of three, we both charge." Again I charged, and again Andy stayed in the corner, and again I got beat up. Well, the third time was the charm. I said "Go!" but didn't move. Andy did. Kaufman got the piledriver, and I left the ring.



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On TV the next Saturday he was livid, "You know Hart, you're a coward. You turned your back on me."

I said, "Look, Mr. Hollywood, you turned your back on me. I count one-two-three and you're back there looking at your watch. What am I supposed to do? Let Lawler break my jaw again? No way, buddy."

We started rolling around, fighting it out right there on TV, although it wasn't much of a scrap. Early on, Lawler had made it perfectly clear, "Look, Andy's got some liability issues, if he gets hurt he's got something like a million dollar insurance policy. We can't afford anybody suing us if he gets injured." So we really had to be extra-careful with him. If you saw us fight, you really didn't see me do much. I simply found a way to fall underneath him — I made myself slip, like I was trying to grab him, and then I flopped around until Eddie Marlin grabbed me. All I could think of was "Don't hurt Andy. Don't hurt Andy." Not that I could have. Who knows, he may very well have kicked my ass. Whenever he was in the ring, the hardest part of the job was making sure he didn't break his nose or lose a tooth. So, if you look back at the footage, you'll notice that he rarely did anything even remotely risky.

Our Saturday morning "fight" was convincing enough to get a Hart-Kaufman feud going, and the next Monday night about 9,000 people were at the Mid-South Coliseum to witness our first match against one another. During that match, Sweet Daddy O came out to interfere on my behalf. Andy went on TV the next week and made an appeal to "The King."

"Jerry Lawler," he said, "I've got ten thousand dollars here that I was going to pay to somebody to beat you. But I hate Jimmy Hart more than I hate you. And I think we finally have



something to agree on. So what I'm saying is this: I'll give you ten thousand dollars to be in my corner Monday night when I fight Jimmy Hart. All you have to do is make sure that none of his goons come out and jump on me."

Lawler grabbed a mic of his own: "I'll tell you what I'll do. Never mind the ten thousand. I'll let you keep your ten grand if you promise to never, ever wrestle anywhere in the country again. I still want you out of wrestling. If you'll promise to that, I'll be in your corner Monday night."

Kaufman agreed. On Monday night Kaufman and Lawler teamed up against me — of course, I had one of the Assassins backing me up. While the match was in progress, and Lawler was distracted, Kaufman snuck up behind his "partner" and threw powder in his eyes, blinding him. Then, all three of us beat him up. The match ended with Kaufman and I hugging each other. We'd planned it all along. It was just one more way of driving Jerry Lawler crazy. Our feud with Lawler continued.

At home, I've still got the mask that Andy wore when we pulled the switch I call Lawler's worst nightmare. At that point in his career Lawler was known for throwing fire. When he was really, really pissed with someone he'd throw fire and burn them. He used flash paper — wads and wads of the stuff — the kind you'd buy in a magic shop I guess it was soaked in gasoline or some kind of flammable liquid. Anyway, I'd done something to really infuriate him, and he let me have it. It wasn't just a work, I really did get burned — part of my moustache and beard was melted away. So, for the next month I wore a mummy mask and sunglasses to play things up. I looked like the Invisible Man, and walked with a cane. During matches I'd just sit in a corner, and after, dejected, I'd just limp my way to



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the back. Jerry Lawler laughed at me and made fun of me every night, but we hadn't taken things any farther than that. For once, we'd gotten into something without really know what we were going to do with the angle.

Eventually, we made our way to Blythville, Arkansas — we didn't even know Andy was in town. I think he'd met a young lady at the matches in Memphis who was from Blythville, and he was in town with her when he realized there was a show. I was as surprised as anyone when one of the guys came into the dressing room and said, "Jimmy, Andy Kaufman's at the back door."

We let Andy in, and I went to Lawler and said, "Baby, I think I've got a way out of the mask angle." I explained my idea: we'd put Andy in my getup, and then, at the right moment, I'd come from the other side of the ring and attack. Well, the match began, and everybody in the place believed I was the mummy at ringside because I'd been under wraps for a month. Finally, Lawler dragged "me" into the ring and pulled off the mask. But it wasn't me — it was Andy Kaufman! Just like we planned, at that moment I appeared, miraculously, hit Lawler with a cane, and knocked him out. To top everything off, Andy and I put the boots to him. Once again, Hart and Kaufman left Jerry Lawler lying in his own blood.

Andy Kaufman was absolutely great for Memphis Wrestling — but of course, even that angle ran its course. No matter who's involved, something that plays week after week will eventually lose its appeal. And Memphis Wrestling was like any complex soap opera, we were in it for the long haul, and we had to be very, very creative to make it all work. Even if the King in the starring role had been Elvis Presley, things, eventually, would



## Andy "I'm from Hollywood" Kaufman

have ended the same way. Not even Elvis could have sold out Mid-South Coliseum forever.

Also, sadly, we began to realize that Andy was sick. I remember him, just before his last Memphis match, really feeling bad. Constantly coughing, suffering wicked headaches. Not knowing any better, I told him, "You know what it is, Andy? It's probably 25, 26 degrees outside here in Memphis, and there's snow on the ground. You just came from California, where it's 78 degrees all the time. Traveling back and forth, going from cold to warm to cold weather, you're probably just run down. It's just the flu or something."

I had no idea — and neither did he — just how sick he really was. On May 16, 1984, he died of lung cancer.

Andy was great. I believe he loved and respected professional wrestling, very much — that he enjoyed it as much as being on "Saturday Night Live." He loved to entertain. From the time he arrived in a building, he played it up. Everything he did, he gave his all. He didn't mind taking bumps and getting bruised for a pop — in that way, he was just one of the boys. He earned our respect: he became a wrestler.

Andy Kaufman put Memphis Wrestling — and "The Mouth of the South" — in the national spotlight. Up in New York City, Vince McMahon was noticing. The attention could have been focused on his own World Wrestling Federation. If only he hadn't turned the comedian down. A while later, when Vince wanted some new heat for the WWF, he would remember Memphis and call on the man who managed Andy "I'm from Hollywood" Kaufman.







# Rockin' and Wrasslin' in New York City

By 1985, Vince McMahon's New York based World Wrestling Federation began pulling away from the pack of regional territories. For the first time, one promotion was beginning to achieve national recognition and popularity. McMahon's top wrestlers were becoming huge stars. Anyone who knew anything about wrestling could see that the WWF was the place to be.

So what did Jimmy Hart do when the WWF called? Nothing. And when they called a second time? I still didn't call back.

Had I taken too many bumps and scrambled my brains? No, chalk it up to a case of mistaken identity.

I was in Nashville in March of '85, sitting in a room at the Days Inn with two wrestlers, Eddie Gilbert and Plowboy Frazier. I called home and asked my wife Ida if there were any important messages. She said, "Yeah, there was a very strange



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phone call, long distance from New York, from a guy named Vince McMahon.”

I just about fell off the bed, laughing.

I asked Gilbert and Plow, “Can you believe this?”

I thought I knew exactly who it was: one of the guys I managed, Austin Idol. Whenever he was scheduled to be in town I’d pick him up at the airport, take him to the matches, and take him back. He had an amazing sense of humor and was always willing to go to any length for a good rib. He used to call me all the time, pretending to be somebody important. His favorite line became, “You need to be in Atlanta, right away,” and he loved to impersonate Jim Barnett, the guy who brought all the big names into Georgia. It was always good for a laugh.

Austin Idol’s favorite guise was Barnett because in the early ’80s Atlanta was even hotter than New York. It was the first territory to be affiliated with a network — Ted Turner’s “Superstation” WTBS. Georgia Championship Wrestling could be seen in more homes than the WWF, but McMahon was coming on strong. Anyway, I figured Austin had grown tired of pretending to be the big guy from Atlanta and had just moved on to his counterpart in New York. Naturally, I brushed it off.

When I arrived home the next day, my wife said, “A George Scott called.” Scott had been a wrestler in the North Carolina territory, and he was now the booker, the guy who made matches, for Vince McMahon.

I still believed it was Austin Idol, taking his joke to new heights, so instead of returning George Scott’s call, I phoned Austin and said, “Hey baby, what do you want?”

He said, “What do you mean?”

“You called my house a couple times.”



## Rockin' and Wrasslin' in New York City

"No, Jimmy, absolutely not. I didn't do that."

A little later that day Hillbilly Jim called. When he was wrestling in Memphis, we called him Harley Davidson, but up in New York they'd remodeled his character. He's from Bowling Green, Kentucky, and we were good friends. I told him, "The craziest thing happened. I got a call from somebody pretending to be Vince McMahon. At least, I think it was a joke. I'm pretty sure it was Austin Idol."

"Well, Jimmy," Hillbilly said, "I'm getting ready to call a guy named Howard Finkel right now. He's in charge of the travel up in New York and also does some announcing. I'll tell him what happened and see if it was really legit."

About five minutes later Hillbilly Jim calls me back and says, "Jimmy Hart, in five minutes you're fixing to get a phone call from Vince McMahon."

I had to brace myself, I was about to faint. My knees were knockin' and my hands were shakin'. I broke out in a cold sweat.

I was freaking out for two very different reasons. First, because I was going to be talking to Vince McMahon, the promoter.

And second, and perhaps more importantly, I was scared to death because I knew that if Lawler and Jarrett found out about the conversation, they'd probably break my legs. At that particular time, the guys running all the other territories hated McMahon. He had the audacity to bring big shows into everybody else's towns, which was considered taboo. Nobody ever tried to cut into somebody else's market. No one moved on Memphis. No one moved on Charlotte. And nobody ever dreamed of infiltrating Texas. Georgia Championship Wrestling was being broadcast on a national Superstation, but they still kept their live shows to their own territory. Only Vince dared



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to break the old unwritten agreements. Worse, he'd begun poaching talent. All the smaller organizations, most of them allied with the old NWA, were scared to death. Promoters across the country were beginning to band together, trying to put a major show together that would stop Vince in his tracks. Individual territories were doing everything they could to hold on to their best talent. The writing was on the wall: if New York wasn't stopped, the regional promotions would die on the vine. Which, eventually, was precisely what happened.

Finally, the phone rang.

"Jimmy Hart? Vince McMahon in New York."

"Yes sir?"

"Listen, we've been watching your video tapes for the last few months, and we'd like to have you up here in New York. We think you're exactly what we need. We like your enthusiasm. We like the way you handle yourself. We love what you do on TV. Are you interested?"

"Of course," I said. "Absolutely."

"When can you come?"

"When do you want me?"

"I'll put you in touch with my travel man. I'd like to have you here tomorrow morning."

The next day, it was "Feet don't fail me now!" We ironed my best shirt, my best pair of pants, and all of a sudden I was on a plane heading into New York City. George Scott was there to pick me up, and we rode in a limo to the Hilton. Before long, I had my first meeting with Vince McMahon, and though it probably lasted for no more than a minute, I never will forget it.

We were introduced and then he said, "I think there's a lot of things we can do with you. We definitely want you to



manage. We'd like for you to do music. We'd like for you to be just all-around for us up here."

I told him, "Mr. McMahon, I'll tell you a few things right now: I will always be on time, and I will always be dependable. I don't do any drugs whatsoever. And whatever you want to do with me is fine." I'm sure he'd heard all that a million times before, especially the part about drugs, but those words held true until the day I left the the WWE, ten years later.

So, just like that, I was working for Vince McMahon. But I still had one problem. I had to get out of Memphis alive.

My last big event for Memphis Wrestling was a local specialty — a scaffold match. As an added feature, there was a bag of powder perched on top of the scaffold. Whoever won got to cover the losers in syrup and the powder. Luckily for me, Lawler and Jarrett were out of town. Lawler had been wrestling in Japan, just about to return, while Jarrett was off hunting. So they left Eddie Gilbert, at the time one of our hottest wrestlers, and me in charge of Saturday morning's TV. It was snowing, I remember. I still hadn't told anybody that I was leaving town, so I thought I'd be smart and get myself suspended. That way, I rationalized, my departure would do the least damage to the territory.

Gilbert and I orchestrated the scaffold match for TV. I was managing a tag team called the Dirty White Boys, and carried a bag of flour to set up on the scaffold. Before the match began, our announcer Lance Russell interviewed me and asked, "Jimmy Hart, how does this match work?"

I said, "You really want to know?"

And then I busted the bag open and dumped it all over Lance.

Lance, at the time Memphis Wrestling's de facto commissioner, was furious. "Jimmy Hart," he said, "you're suspended!"



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I ran and jumped into the ring, screaming, "You can't suspend me!"

Russell ordered out the police, and I got on the proverbial bicycle. I scurried underneath the ring, around the ring, in the ring and back out again, with at least five cops chasing me. And finally, captured, they dragged me away. I thought everything had worked out perfectly. Lawler and Jarrett would be mad at me, but I could reason with them, saying, "Well, I got suspended anyway."

But of course, things didn't work out quite so neatly.

Jerry Lawler called as soon as he got back from Japan. "Jimmy," he said, "there's a rumor going around that you might be leaving and going back into music."

"No, Jerry," I said, "that's not it. I am leaving, but I'm going to New York."

"You can't leave us. And anyway, if you are going, you're going to have to do a loser-leaves-town match first."

"You're crazy if you think I'm going into the Coliseum for a loser-leaves-town. There's no way I'd be dumb enough to let you bust me up. If I do that, Jerry, I'll end up with a broken leg."

"I wouldn't do that."

"Well, I remember a punch from a few years back that 'accidentally' broke my jaw. And I'm not saying that wasn't an accident . . . but accidents don't happen twice, baby. And it sure ain't gonna happen to me. I was born at night, King, but not last night."

He laughed.

I will always love Memphis Wrestling, and always remember the second career those guys gave me, and of course I wanted to help them out. So we compromised, putting Eddie Gilbert



in my place against Jerry Lawler in the loser-leaves-town match. Eddie made a speech: "If you beat me, Jerry Lawler, on Monday night, in the Coliseum, then Jimmy Hart will leave town, *forever*."

There was still a problem: I had already made my plans with Vince McMahon, and I had to be in New York right away — I wasn't even going to be able to make it to my own farewell bout. Fortunately, there was a guy in Louisville who would always come to the matches dressed like Jimmy Hart. He looked just like me, and from a distance you couldn't really tell the difference. It was unbelievable. I put Jerry Lawler and Jerry Jarrett in touch with that boy in Louisville.

So with Eddie Gilbert fighting for me in the ring, with a lookalike from Louisville standing in for me outside the ring, I had my loser-leaves-town match. Eddie Gilbert lost and I was free to go to New York. I'm probably the only one who ever lost a Memphis loser-leaves-town match who actually never went back.

Still, my feud with Lawler never really ended. For the longest time after I left, when I'd pass through the Memphis airport, the security guys would go, "Jimmy Hart, you better watch out for Jerry Lawler."

I'd always play along: "He ain't gonna get me. He's too busy 'training' at Burger King."

Sometimes they'd say, "Jimmy Hart, since you left Memphis, it's been dead."

I'd laugh and say, "That's right, it's the House That Jimmy Hart Built." I knew it would all eventually get back to Lawler.

He took things to another level, telling everybody, "Jimmy Hart was starving to death making music, and I took him out of those nightclubs and made him a star."



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“No,” I’d explain, “the reason I had to get out of music is that when Lawler sang on stage with me one night he killed my crowd.” So, we kept the feud running. But really, if it hadn’t been for Jerry Lawler I’d have never been in professional wrestling. I owe a lot to him, truly; he opened the door, and helped me get over for years.

I arrived in New York City, two weeks before the first WrestleMania, McMahon’s groundbreaking closed-circuit TV extravaganza, and the WWF put me to work in the office. NBC was doing a special on the event, hosted by Bob Costas, and I was in charge of making sure he had all the footage and access he needed. Well, the truth was I knew as much about what was going on as the man in the moon. Here I am, just in from Tennessee, a small territory, where you didn’t even have a wrestling office, or where you used a broom closet if you had one at all, and all of a sudden I’ve got my own office and a secretary. On top of that, I’m calling Bob Costas, trying my best to sound important, using my most “official” voice: “Bob? Jimmy Hart, WWF wrestling.”

He’d said, “Hi, Jimmy, it’s great to finally speak with you. Listen, I need footage of . . .” So, I pulled it off.

I made my in-ring WWF debut at “the granddaddy of them all” — the first WrestleMania, at Madison Square Garden in New York City, on March 31, 1985. I’ll never forget it. Going out in front of all those people, heading to the ring in Madison Square Garden, a place that I’d never stepped foot in before in my life, gave me goosebumps. Just being in the same building, sharing the same stage, as Muhammad Ali, who was the main event’s guest referee, made it even more awesome. It was overwhelming, but still, at that very moment I realized that I was a



part of something that was making wrestling history. For the first time the closed-circuit broadcast of a wrestling event was making international headlines. It was the beginning of a new era.

Right off the bat Vince gave me Greg “The Hammer” Valentine and King Kong Bundy to manage, which was a fantastic break for me. At the time, Greg was the Intercontinental Champion, so from day one I was managing a title-holder. I already knew King Kong Bundy, having managed him in Memphis. Even better, that day I went 2-and-0. First, King Kong Bundy squashed S.D. Jones in nine seconds flat — a WWF record that wouldn’t be broken until Diesel defeated Bob Backlund to win the WWE Championship ten years later. And later, Valentine pinned the Junkyard Dog. (Okay, technically, we didn’t win that one. The ref ruled Greg had “cheated” and the match was restarted. And ultimately, The Hammer was counted out. But “The Mouth of the South” was off and running.)

After WrestleMania the WWF was the hottest thing going. The big stars in New York at the time were Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant and Rowdy Roddy Piper; while Big John Studd, Cowboy Bob Orton, Nikolai Volkoff, the Iron Sheik, Ricky “the Dragon” Steamboat and Paul “Mr. Wonderful” Orndorff proved a stellar supporting cast. Today, we’re used to wrestling being on TV all the time, often live, with cable or satellite dishes offering hundreds of channels to almost every home. But in 1985, Vince McMahon had but one taped show running each week — remember, too, that the pay-per-view era had yet to begin, and that even Wrestlemania could only be seen in a participating arena. Further, in most markets it played early on Saturday afternoons — at a time when people are doing a



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million different things. Still, that one show drew enough fans to pack three arenas, every night of the week, all around the country. And the big name draws rarely ever faced one another during those broadcasts — the matches were primarily “squashes,” quick bouts where the main guys destroyed one of any number of “jobbers” (the undercard guys whose role was solely to lose convincingly — an underrated art). It was amazing. We literally had three different rosters working almost every day. Usually, Hulk would main event one town, Piper another, while Andre would be featured in the third. And all those shows would be sellouts.

The WWF flew us all over the world. Which was remarkable for any wrestler who'd been in the business for a few years, but especially for me, coming from Memphis, Tennessee, where everything was car-driven. I'd gone from a life of endless road-trips, criss-crossing the South in one beat-up old car after another, to traveling on a plane seven days a week. Sometimes we'd work thirty-five or forty days straight before we'd get a day off, so logistics were crucial. It was all coordinated in a remarkably professional way. They had agents who took care of everything for you. And if you wanted a cash advance every night you could get one. It would come off your check, of course.

We got used to performing in to houses of 8-9-10,000 people. And no matter where we went, fans would mob us. I was used to being recognized in Memphis, but with the WWF everything got bigger and better. Pretty soon, people were asking for my autograph all over the world.

I was having the time of my life.

As I've already mentioned, when I got to the WWF I upgraded my outfits. They already had a sharp-dressed manager,



the legendary former wrestler who called himself “Classy” Freddie Blassie. So, sticking with what worked in Memphis, I built up the rock and roll gimmick, and started wearing the elaborate airbrushed jackets that have since become as recognizable as my “The Mouth of the South” nickname.

I also added an item to my wardrobe that essentially became my trademark — and sometimes my “foreign object”: the megaphone.

It was actually something Vince McMahon came up with after returning from business in Japan. I believe he'd seen a Japanese wrestling manager using one to scream at people. Somebody who took care of props handed me the thing and said, “Jimmy, meet your new gimmick.”

“Okay,” I said, its various possible uses already beginning to come to me. “Sure thing; sounds great.” And that megaphone really did turn out to be perfect for me. I could save my voice and still be obnoxious, or I could brain somebody with it, should the need arise. My original megaphone is on display at the Hard Rock Cafe in New York now, along with Honky Tonk Man's original guitar.

WrestleMania was so successful that a year later, on April 7, 1986, they decided to do it all over again — only bigger. WrestleMania II was broadcast out of three different cities and venues — Chicago's Rosemont Horizon, New York's Nassau Coliseum and L.A.'s Sports Arena — and for the first time folks could watch it, via pay-per-view, in the comfort of their own homes. There were actually three “main events” — Hogan defeating Bundy in a cage match headlining one card, while Andre the Giant finished off a Battle Royale by besting a young Bret Hart in another. Mr. T, famous for his role in *Rocky III* and



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the B.A. character he played on TV's "A-Team," had been a part of the first WrestleMania, where he tagged with Hulk against Piper and Orndorff. For WrestleMania II he was featured once again, in the third main event, stepping into the Nassau Coliseum ring to box Rowdy Roddy. Again, I made two memorable, successful appearances. Managing Terry Funk and Dory Funk Jr. (at the time he was wrestling as "Hoss") against JYD and Tito Santana, and "Adorable" Adrian Adonis, who got the 1-2-3 over Uncle Elmer. As usual, I stuck my nose where it didn't belong, doing everything I could to distract both officials and opponents. Of course my guys won.

A year later, it was "the third time's the charm." WrestleMania III took place in the Pontiac Silverdome, where the Detroit Lions play football, and shattered a world indoor attendance record once held by the Rolling Stones. I had three matches in front of those 93,173 fans. I was in Adrian's corner again, for his match against Rowdy Roddy Piper, but Piper won. The Hart Foundation was together by this time, and along with Danny Davis, the wrestling referee, we won a three-man tag against the British Bulldogs and Tito Santana. Finally, I was managing my old friend Wayne Ferris, who was now known as the Honky Tonk Man, against Jake "The Snake" Roberts. Honky won that one by pinfall.

The Hart Foundation was very important to my WWF career. They were the first tag team I managed to become the champs. Bret "the Hit Man" Hart had come out of Calgary's infamous "Dungeon," where he'd been trained by his father, the legendary Stu Hart. He was already a star up in Alberta, Canada, where he'd been a main-eventer for his father's Stampede Wrestling. Bret had joined the WWF a year before I





**The First Family: various incarnations.**









The Hart Family at home.  
And my son Jimmy Jr.,  
fighting the war on terror  
with two friends, holding  
the Torrie Wilson issue of  
PLAYBOY.







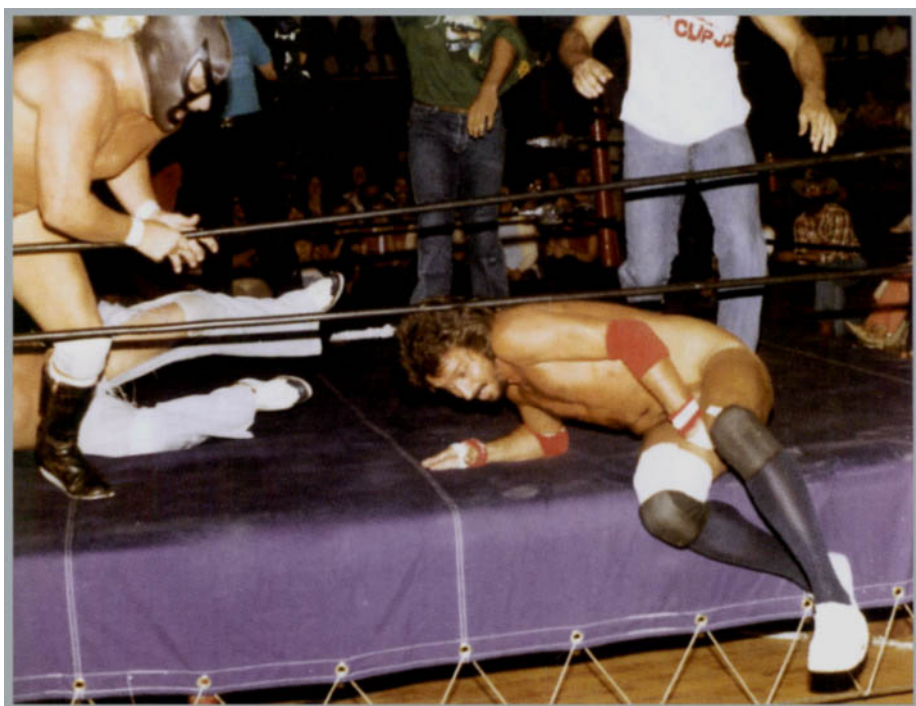
More Memphis-era stars — including the Iron Sheik, the man Hogan would beat for the WWF title and to unleash Hulkamania on the world.







Thanks "King" . . .







Dusty and Harley . . .







. . . The Funks and "The Butcher": the legends of wrestling.







"The King" meets NASCAR.



In Europe with the boys from the WWF.

















The Governor and the best-selling, hardcore legend/author.



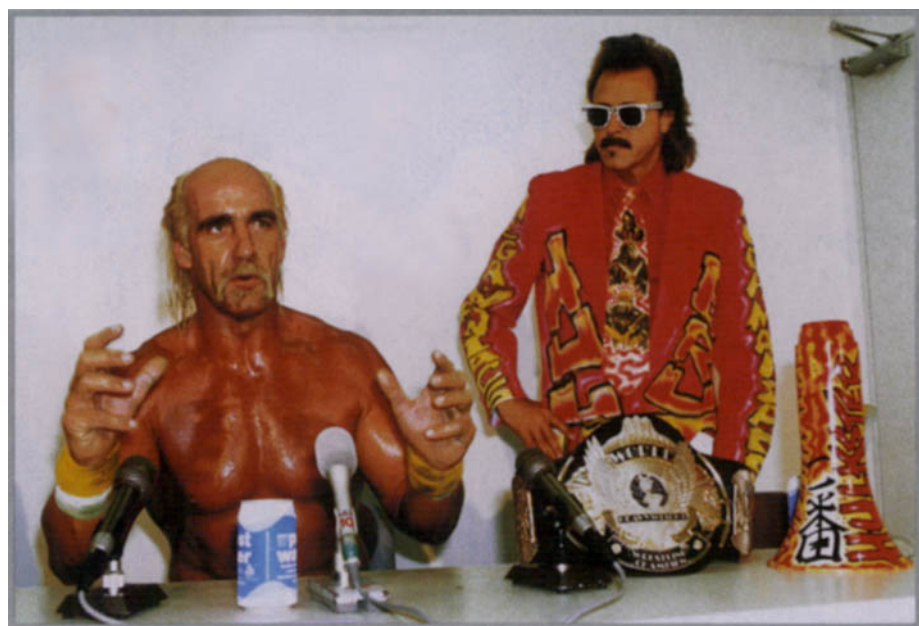




From Shaq to Jenny: you've gotta love wrestling.











**Still Rockin', Still Wrasslin'.**









got there, and he was doing okay as a single. But when he was teamed up with his brother-in-law, Jim “The Anvil” Neidhart, with me as their manager, he, and the Hart Foundation, became unstoppable. We won the world tag team title in January of '87 from the British Bulldogs and held it until October that year, when Neidhart needed to rest a bad back.

Then Bret Hart fired me and, of course, that started a feud. I got even when my new guys, Demolition (Crush and Smash), became WWF tag team champs. Although Bret and “The Anvil” got the title back in 1990, in 1989 they had already been adding insult to injury: at WrestleMania V, in Atlantic City’s Trump Plaza, they beat my guys, Honky Tonk Man and Greg Valentine, who were at the time tagging up as Rhythm and Blues. Eventually, slowly, I exacted my revenge. At WrestleMania VII in Los Angeles I managed the Nasty Boys (Bryan Knobbs and Jerry Sags) to a World title win over the Hart Foundation. Better still, the following January my guy The Mountie (Jacques Rougeau), beat Bret one-on-one for Hart’s first singles gold, the coveted Intercontinental Championship.

One of my favorite wrestlers from my WWF years was the Honky Tonk Man. Everybody who’s made any money in wrestling has something about them that makes them different. Wayne Ferris wasn’t the greatest wrestler, but if you’re talking entertainment-savvy he was second to none. Whether you’re talking success in music or wrestling or just about anything else, you’ve got to have a little bit of the showman in you. And, especially in wrestling, you’ve got to have “it” — usually something visually special, a “look” that makes you instantly recognizable. And, well, Honky had “it.” The fact that we were both from Memphis worked to our advantage — there was



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something we shared that just made everything click. Together, we felt like the total package. He did the Elvis lookalike-thing and I was Colonel Parker. Once Wayne learned a couple of guitar chords, the rest was history. The Honky Tonk Man held the Intercontinental title for the better part of two years.

When I was hired by the WWF, Vince told me he wanted me to do music for the company, as well as the in-ring stuff, which is exactly what I wanted to do. I had been putting rock and wrestling together since the late seventies, when I cut that song and video for Handsome Jimmy Valiant. Heck, it's what really started everything. But the WWF took music, like everything else, to a new level. Once again it was the difference between flying first class and riding four-to-a-car in Memphis.

Cyndi Lauper, the pop star who had hits with "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" and "True Colors," brought the WWF rock and roll credibility. A huge fan of Captain Lou Albano, one of Vince's wrestlers and managers, Lauper got Vince to let her use Lou in a video. One thing led to another, and before you knew it, the WWF was doing promotion with MTV. Rock and wrestling, as I already knew, meshed together perfectly.

Cyndi was managed by her boyfriend, Dave Wolf, and he was friends with Dick Clark. I think they all approached Vince with the idea of marrying her stuff with the WWF, and eventually a storyline was created that would get her involved in the first WrestleMania. Later, Dave Wolf decided the time was right to do a wrestling album. He approached me: "Jimmy, I know that you sing. Have you got a song for it?"

"Yeah," I said, "I've got a song called 'Eat Your Heart Out, Rick Springfield.'" Springfield was one of the hottest crossover stars of the early eighties. He had a hit record with "Jesse's



Girl” and a starring role on the soap opera “General Hospital.” Anyway, that record — which was called, appropriately enough, *The Wrestling Album*, was pretty bizarre, even by WWF standards. Captain Lou Albano did a track on the history of wrestling. Mean Gene Okerlund, one of our announcers, performed “Tutti Frutti,” the old Little Richard hit. Nikolai Volkoff sang “Cara Mia.” Rick Derringer was also featured on one tune, so there was some solid music on there. It’s been re-released a couple times, and it’s still available.

A second record, *Piledriver II*, was released in 1988. I submitted the “Demolition” theme song and “Crank It Up,” both of which featured Rick Derringer on guitar, as well as Honky’s signature tune, “Hunka Hunka Honky Tonk Man.” They took my demos, cut the tracks and included all three songs on the album. My work earned a couple of awards from SESAC, a company that licenses music performance rights. I went to the awards presentation during Country Music Week in Nashville, and made a brief acceptance speech: “This is a lot more fun,” I said, “than getting beer thrown on me every night.”

Eventually Rhino Records put together a compilation of old wrestling music called *Wrestling Rocks*. They included “Son of a Gypsy,” and ever since, no matter where I’ve worked, my music’s been on every wrestling album. J.J. McGuire, who co-wrote a lot of my wrestling stuff, was in my second group of Gentrys. My booking agency had called me when I was looking to put together that band, and said they had a guy who could play just about anything — bass and drums and keyboards — that would be perfect for the band. I hired him right away and he’s stayed with me through the years. Everything had come full circle, from the Gentrys, to wrestling and, in a way, back again.



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Songs for the Legion of Doom, Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka, the Hart Foundation and the Hearnbreak Kid, Shawn Michaels, all share the Jimmy Hart sound.

In the decade I was with the WWF it was the biggest thing going, and I was right in the middle of it all. I appeared at the first nine WrestleManias, and I managed most of the biggest heels in professional wrestling: the Funk Brothers (Terry and Dory); Ted “The Million Dollar Man” DiBiase and Irwin R. Shyster, who tagged up as Money, Inc.; Danny Davis, the wrestling referee; The Rougeau Brothers, the Natural Disasters (Typhoon and Earthquake), the Hart Foundation, the Missing Link, Honky Tonk Man, Greg “The Hammer” Valentine, King Kong Bundy, Adrian Adonis and Dino Bravo.

The WWF is one of the all-time great success stories, both in wrestling and in the television and entertainment industry in general, but there were ups and downs. It wasn’t all smooth sailing, but you’d never know it from looking at Vince McMahon. He has an incredible poker face. Every time you’d see him, his hair was immaculate, his suits looked great, and he was always up tempo and upbeat. Whether it was during the steroid controversy, or any other problem period of the 80s or early 90s, you just had to believe in Vince McMahon — whatever he said came true, whatever he did would succeed. When wrestling was being hit hardest, when the WWF was being attacked, you believed that he’d get everything back on its feet. And he did. Vince was the consummate professional, and he always treated his people professionally.

It was the same thing with Jerry Jarrett. When he walked into a building, there was just something about him that spelled success. He always looked great. His clothes were



always perfect. He oozed confidence. When the territory was down, he said with hard work we'd rebuild better than ever — and then he'd inspire everyone else by example, working tirelessly to fix even the smallest problem. He'd do anything to make the promotion succeed. I've been very lucky, working for people with that kind of drive.

Throughout the years Vince and I built a solid relationship, and he's always put me over. "The best manager I've got, the best employee I've got," he'd say, "is Jimmy Hart. He's always on time, he's always there for us, ready to help." If anything controversial occurred, or if anything went down on the road that might hurt the company, I'd always make sure Vince understood what was going on. No, I wasn't being a spy or a stooge — I was working for the good of the company, more often than not taking up for the boys, articulating the concerns of the wrestlers. Without them working as hard as they did, there'd be no WWF. But you have to realize, Vince worked hard, too. You just couldn't say anything bad about a guy who spent 24 hours a day, seven days a week, trying to make you money. I was a team player, and I knew part of my job was to help keep the company running smoothly — so we'd all keep on making that money.

Of course, in any business, things don't always go according to plan, and the WWF was no exception. Some of the wrestlers just didn't get along, and sometimes feuds wouldn't get left in the ring. Bad blood backstage led to some tricky situations. One of them involved two wrestlers I managed, Jacques and Raymond Rougeau, and one of the most beloved tag teams in the business, the British Bulldogs. Davey Boy Smith and the Dynamite Kid were two of the greatest tricksters in the history



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of wrestling. When you came back into the locker room after a match, you could never be sure they hadn't put itching powder into your street clothes. In the middle of winter they might take a pair of scissors to your pants — you'd come back and they'd be laying there like everything was fine, but when you picked them up the legs would fall to the floor. When Jimmy Jack Funk was working the cowboy angle for us, he'd always have to hunt for his hat up in the rafters. They'd do anything for a laugh — padlock your suitcase, cancel your plane reservations, anything.

They double locked Jacques Rougeau's suitcase one day, and he decided it was time to put an end to their reign of terror. He warned them: "Dynamite," he'd say, "you keep on messing with me and I promise you something bad's gonna happen." Well, sure enough, before a show in Miami Beach, Jacques was minding his own business playing cards in the back. Next thing you know, Dynamite storms in, turns Jacques around, and goes off on him. He really beat him up, busting Jacques' nose wide open.

Dynamite's story was that Jacques had gone to Pat Patterson, who was a WWF booker, former superstar, and Vince's second in command, and that Pat had gone to Vince: ultimately, Vince laid down the law, telling the Bulldogs they had to stop playing their pranks. In Dynamite's eyes, Jacques was a stoolie. I honestly don't know if that's the way it happened or not — Dynamite might have just decided he hated Jacques, and the attack may have been unprovoked.

After that, Jacques, being very proud, said, "You know what, Jimmy? I swear, I won't get mad, not now, but somewhere down the line I will get even."



## Rockin' and Wrasslin' in New York City

For the next month, each and every day, Jacques planned his revenge. In his hotel room, he'd take a mattress off the bed and practise. He'd seem relaxed, and then all of a sudden he would hit the thing — like he was suckerpunching somebody. He knew he'd only get the one punch with the Dynamite Kid. Tom Billington was that tough.

In the meantime, the Bulldogs ignored whatever dressing-down they may have received and kept ribbing everyone, playing pranks. Their reign of terror intensified. And locker room morale plummeted, with all the boys living in fear. Finally, Vince called for a serious meeting. He intended to address the problem, and was going to tell the boys that fun was fun, but that things had gotten out of hand. That the last thing we needed was our guys really fighting. Before Vince's meeting, Jacques and Raymond were sitting beside the podium where Mean Gene Okerlund did his announcing and interviews. I said, "Hey, Jacques, hey Ray, Vince wants everyone to get together now."

Jacques said, "Jimmy, we're not going to go to the meeting. But we just want to tell you — thanks for everything you've done for us. You've been so wonderful to us, and we love you very much, but if you don't see us anymore, well, we just wanted to make sure you knew that. You're one of the few people who's always been there for us."

Of course, I didn't know what to make of what he'd just told me. But it wasn't long before I understood his cryptic words of thanks. Rougeau didn't want me to be involved, didn't want me to know anything about what he was about to do.

Later, while I was with the Honky Tonk Man, doing an interview at the other end of the building, people started



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running by, yelling as they passed: “Oh, my God, you won’t believe it! Jacques Rougeau just beat up Dynamite Kid.”

It happened like this: Jacques had waited for his moment, patiently, by the dining room door. And when Dynamite finally emerged from lunch, he nailed him with a brutal, well-rehearsed suckerpunch. And then he kept on hitting him. Eventually, Raymond pulled Jacques back, saying, “That’s enough. That’s enough.”

Both of them had their bags packed. They just got in their car and left.

Three weeks later, Vince had a private meeting with Jacques and Raymond and Dynamite and Davey Boy about working everything out for the good of the company. He told them they’d have to work together, or not work at all. And with that, things did work out okay. Not long after that most of the boys were involved in a big battle royale; the match was booked in a way that would leave the Dynamite Kid and Jacques Rougeau to face one another in the end. They were forced to work together. And they both acted professionally. There were no more confrontations.

The Rougeau Brothers were also involved in one of the funniest incidents that occurred during my WWF years. I was on the other side at the time, with the Hart Foundation. Bret and “The Anvil” were battling the Rougeaus in White Plains, New York. They were working with this little guy, a really small referee who wore a bad black toupee. You could tell it was a rug because it stuck out all over the place. Before we went down for the match, this little ref, with a thick French Canadian accent said, “Whatever you do, do not, please, touch my hair. Do not, please, knock my toupee from me.”



## Rockin' and Wrasslin' in New York City

The match got going and we did a spot where one of the Rougeau Brothers was trapped in our corner. Anvil goes to hit him, but the ref steps in — he's there to protect Rougeau. (Rougeau had his back to the turnbuckle, and the toupee-wearing ref was facing him.) Anyway, Anvil pushes the little guy into Rougeau, and then throws a cheap-shot punch over him. As fate would have it, Anvil happened to be suffering through an arm injury at the time. Fluid had been building up on his elbow, so he'd begun wearing an elbow pad. To keep it secure through a match he'd hastily tape the thing up just before heading to the ring. And well, on that night, I guess some of the tape had been turned backwards — sticky-side out. You can imagine what happened next. As Anvil threw his punch, his arm skimmed over the referee's head: of course, the tape on the bottom of his elbow grazed the little French Canadian's toupee. And stuck. When Anvil pulled back his hand, the wig came back too. Stuck to his elbow pad, it looked like a big drowned rat.

From there, the whole match quickly fell apart. The crowd could see the toupee on Anvil's arm, and thousands of people began laughing. Bret and I, on the outside of the ring, couldn't help but crack up, too. Anvil, however, hadn't looked at his arm — so he hadn't seen the wig. The ref had noticed his hair was gone, but he hadn't seen it hanging from Anvil's arm. Instead, he'd dropped to the mat to search for his hair. Finally, he finds it hanging from the elbow pad, grabs it, and sticks it back onto his head. But, naturally, now the thing's cockeyed, so it kind of looks like a sideways army helmet. And everybody is laughing. The ref was so flustered he stopped the match.



## The Mouth of the South

Afterwards, we were actually called upstairs to face the local commission people — yes, there was a local commission that regulated matches back then, just like there still is in boxing. The referee thought Anvil did it on purpose, and they were going to fine all of us a thousand dollars each for making fun of him. Arnold Skolin, who was the local agent, finally managed to convince the guy that it was an accident. More than a decade later, considering all of the slapstick stuff that's become a regular feature of contemporary wrestling, it would have been viewed as great piece of entertainment. But back then every match was serious business: we were serious in the ring and the fans were always serious. We were happy to get out of White Plains without a fine.

I was in another match that was screwed up when a wig inadvertently came off — but this time it was my wig. We were somewhere in upstate New York and I was with the Honky Tonk Man for a bout against Brutus Beefcake and Sherri Martell. We were working an angle where I'd dress up as Peggy Sue, Honky's girlfriend. I wore a veil to hide my face, a blonde wig, bobbie socks, black-and-white saddle shoes, and a big poodle skirt — the whole deal. Honky had been baiting Sherri, saying, "I can get any girl to beat you up." And then he'd bring me out. Of course, everybody knew it was me.

During this particular match, some guy from the crowd suddenly jumped over the rail, grabbed my wig and ran back out through the audience. The whole place began to roar. Our finish was ruined. But even with the crowd laughing and going crazy, we had to figure out a way to take the match home. I began jumping around the ring. Brutus stepped up to manhandle me a bit, then, he ripped off my veil. Since the gag



had already been exposed, he acknowledged who Peggy Sue really was — “The Mouth of the South.” To finish things off he started ripping the tissue from my bra and throwing it everywhere. Then he gave me a knee drop and threw me over the top rope. Thankfully, that was it.

Recently, there have been so many tragedies in the wrestling world — “Mr. Perfect” Curt Hennig, Road Warrior Hawk, Crash Holly, The Big Boss Man . . . the list is far too long — that you could fill an entire book with stories about fallen comrades and speculation about what may or may not have gone wrong. But even the days of my New York run were clouded with terrible, unnecessary loss. Personally, I was shaken by the deaths of two guys that I truly enjoyed managing: “Adorable” Adrian Adonis, whose real name was Keith Franke, and Dino Bravo. The official story on Dino is that he had gotten himself involved with a gang that dealt in smuggled cigarettes, but the word is that the “gang” was the Mafia. Whatever the truth may really be, in 1993, at the age of 44, he was murdered. Adrian’s death was an accident. The WWF had released him, and in 1988, while working for Dave “The Bearman” McKigney’s east coast summer promotion, the van he was driving in crashed on the Trans-Canada Highway, trying to avoid a moose.

One of my favorite WWF memories has Adrian in the center of things. We were wrestling at the Nassau Coliseum in Long Island, but we were staying that night at a Ramada Inn in Newark, New Jersey, because we were flying out of the Newark airport the next morning, and the hotel was right by the airport. After Adrian’s match, he went to the back and bought a case of bottled beer. At that time the wrestlers could buy just about



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anything they wanted in the dressing room area. Terry Funk, who I was also managing, was traveling with us. Anyway, we packed our gear, loaded up the car and started to drive, in a constant freezing rain, back to Newark.

Terry was behind the wheel, going way over the speed limit; and he and Adrian were drinking the beer. Having an open beer in the car was, of course, illegal — so as they finished one I'd screw the tops back on the bottles and put the empties back in the case. If we were stopped, I thought, and the bottles were all capped, then it wouldn't look like anyone had been drinking. Well, after a few bottles of beer, while we were still on the road, Adrian had to pee. While he was out of the car, Terry decided he had to go, too. Before Terry returned, Adrian jumped behind the wheel. Of course, they ended up arguing about who was going to drive — but as this is going on, Adrian takes off, speeding like hell.

We'd only traveled another five miles down the highway when we heard the sirens.

Anyway, the police car pulls up beside us. The officer on the passenger side rolls down his window and says, "Pull this car over, now," shining this big light into the car — all while we're doing at least 90 miles an hour. But Adrian will not pull over. So the police radio for help. Now, here comes another police car. They pass and go up ahead and set up a rolling roadblock — the kind of thing you see on "Cops," where they get in front of you and use their car to slow you down. Then, another police car gets behind us. Eventually, we pull over. An officer approaches, cautiously. Adrian gets out. Terry Funk gets out. I get out.

They make us walk the line and do their sobriety in the freezing rain, the whole deal. Then they see the beer in the



back: of course, we have to go the station with them. They let me drive because I hadn't been drinking.

When we got to the precinct, a small building in Newark, they took Adrian downstairs. Terry and I were sitting upstairs, talking quietly: "We better get some bail money," I said. "This is going to be really screwed up."

All of a sudden, Adrian bounced back in, smiling. "Hey," he said, "come on down. We're gonna get pictures made." We went downstairs and had pictures taken with the captain, and everyone else who was around. They had a little holding cell — and we got inside and had pictures taken with the prisoners. We signed autographs, and then we were on our way.

Being a WWF celebrity had its fringe benefits.

Perhaps the most bizarre thing I did in a WWF ring involved fighting Alice Cooper. It was *Wrestlemania III*, and Honky and I were up against Jake "The Snake" Roberts and the rock star. Cooper threw his big python on me and I couldn't get out from under it fast enough. People probably thought we were used to being around a snake, since Jake carried one, but we always kept away from Damian — that damn snake would relieve himself all over everybody.

There were so many wonderful superstars in New York at that time that I just couldn't manage them all. Roddy Piper — what an all-round talented guy. "The Rockers," Marty Jannetty and Shawn Michaels — you could see that Shawn and Marty had all the ability in the world and Shawn's now a major superstar, one of the biggest ever in the business. Shawn could talk, he had a certain look, and in terms of workrate he was second to none. The Undertaker — a big guy with a great gimmick. The same was true of the Ultimate Warrior.



## The Mouth of the South

Some of my first matches with Honky Tonk Man were against the Warrior, Jim Hellwig, and with him, too, there was a Memphis connection. He'd come through that territory right around the time I left. He was just starting out, and was part of a tag team called the Blade Runners. Even then you could tell — by the fans' response, the way he came into the ring, and the way he looked — that he was going to be a major star. By the time he was in the WWF, if you wanted to see how big he'd become, all you had to do was to look at the merchandise tables. Ultimate Warrior merchandise was one of Vince's biggest sellers for years. He made millions, but he eventually just burned out. Some people are cut out for wrestling; some people aren't. Some people get in it to make whatever they can, and when it's over, it stays over. Oh, the Ultimate Warrior's old partner in the Blade Runners still wrestles. He became WCW's champ, finally; you might have heard of him: he was the man they call Sting.

Over time, I did just about everything for the WWF — managing, music, backstage and behind the scenes stuff — even referee. Sort of . . .

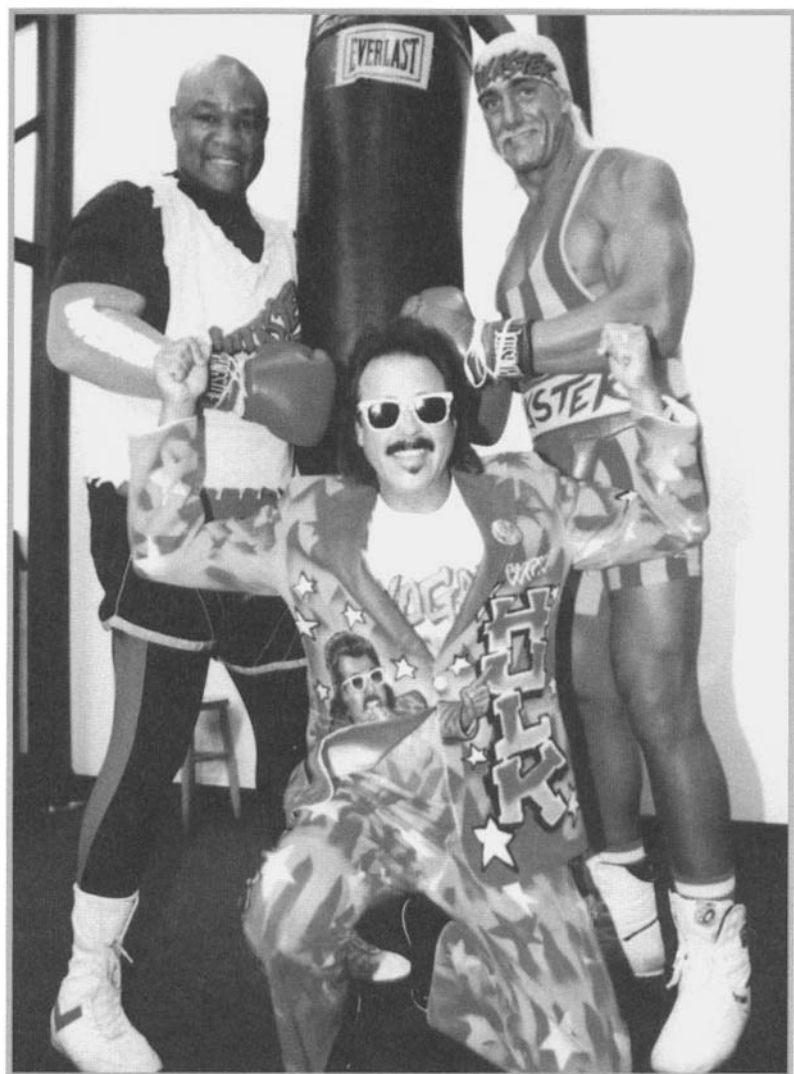
For a brief while, I even stood in the corner of Hulk Hogan, the biggest star in professional wrestling. I never imagined that things could get any better. But Hulk could.

He had bigger plans — plans that went beyond wrestling — and, fortunately, his plans included Jimmy Hart.



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## Where Hulk Goes ...

Hulk Hogan was the biggest star in professional wrestling in 1985, and he was the very first person I saw when I walked into the World Wrestling Federation offices. He just happened to be sitting there, and when he saw me he said, “Man, I hope you’re coming to manage me.”

The WWF guy he was with said, “No, I’m afraid not, Hulk. Jimmy’s going to be a heel, he’s going to manage the bad guys.”

For the last few years, whenever anyone’s asked, “What’s the future of professional wrestling?” I’ve always given the same answer: “Where Hulk goes, wrestling goes.” That’s how powerful and popular he is — and things weren’t much different when I first arrived in New York. I should have known: if Hulk Hogan wanted you to be his manager, then sooner or later you were going to be his manager. But even in my wildest dreams I never figured I was going to be his manager *outside* of wrestling, too.



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I first met — and managed — Hulk Hogan back in Memphis. Jerry Lawler and I were in the middle of one of our big feuds, and I was bringing in whoever I could get my hands on to knock Lawler off his pedestal and generally make his life miserable. It was all part of a running storyline, where every week Lawler would beat one of my guys and then say, “Next week, Hart, I’m gonna get my hands on you.” But, of course, I’d bring in another “unstoppable object” to protect myself the following Saturday. Usually, an imposing heel who wrestled for another promotion. Back then, the Monday night extravaganza in the Mid-South Coliseum was our big show. Most of the smaller promotions were quiet on that day, so Jarrett or Lawler could pick up the phone and call Florida, or even New York — because all the territories were small then — and work out a deal to share talent. It was a good arrangement for everyone. We had access to a lot of wrestlers, and because they wanted to make the extra payoff, they’d happily come to us on off-nights. So, I’d bring in Terry Funk, and Lawler would beat him. Next, I’d unveil Dory Funk, and Lawler would beat him, too. Nick Bockwinkel, Ken Patera, Jack Brisco, Jerry Brisco, King Kong Bundy, Jesse “The Body” Ventura — one after the other they’d come, and the result was pretty much the same . . . Lawler would somehow get the better of my guys and me. This went on for years and we drew great crowds. Hulk Hogan was working for Verne Gagne’s Minneapolis-based AWA at the time, and he was also doing some work as a heel for the WWF. And yes, Hulk was one of those people we brought in to fight Lawler. I was in his corner.

But I knew about Hulk even before he was brought in to face “The King,” before there ever was a “Hulk Hogan” — and



before I'd really gotten into wrestling. I was still doing music with the Gentrys, but I had met and struck up a friendship with Lawler. So, I was still pretty much coming to the Mid-South Coliseum as a fan. Lawler had given me carte blanche, though, and I could hang around backstage and watch and learn. At the time, the Gentrys had just finished a Dick Clark tour, and I went down to the Coliseum on a Monday night to unwind. In those days there were two doors that the wrestlers would make their ring entrances from. I would stand on the babyface side. There was a big mesh screen that you could look through, that could be opened up to bring chairs or props through.

It was from there that I saw a guy named Terry Bollea enter the ring for the first time. I think he was called Terry Boulder then, because he and Ed Leslie (later known as Brutus "The Barber" Beefcake) were tagging up as the Boulder Brothers. Ed was on the card that night, too, but they were fighting as singles.

Anyway, Lawler and I were standing there, behind the mesh screen, watching a match, when Lawler said, "What do you think of that big ol' blond guy in the ring there?"

I said, "Oh, my God, he's great! Look how big he is. He's unbelievable! Listen to the fans pop!" Coming from a musical background and maybe being more entertainment-wise, I wasn't just thinking about how accomplished a guy was in the ring. I was reacting viscerally, to who got the biggest "pop," the best crowd response, and to who looked the most impressive, who people really talked about. Even back then you could see Hulk was going to be a major star.

"Well," Jerry shook his head and said, "that big guy, he asked me to manage him. I have a chance to sign him to a contract."



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I said, “Man! Gosh! I hope you take him up on it. He’s gonna be a superstar.” After all, he was 300 pounds, and stood six-foot-six.

“Are you crazy?” Lawler said. “That guy will never draw you a dime in professional wrestling. He doesn’t have what it takes.”

To this day, every time I see Lawler I say, “You should have listened to me and signed Hulk Hogan.”

He denies the conversation ever took place. But I know the truth.

Why did Lawler feel the way he did about Hogan? You’d assume, being as successful as he’s been through the years, he would have been the first to see Hulk’s potential. But Lawler was “The King” of Memphis then, and Terry Bollea was the man from nowhere. Every territory had its king in those days. Dusty Rhodes was a superstar in Florida, the Funks reigned supreme in Texas, but “the big ol’ blond guy” was just getting into the business, and had yet to build a strong base. He was working out of Pensacola, Florida, and was still learning his craft. I don’t think any of wrestling’s veteran stars really knew what the future held. Lawler couldn’t see how big Hulk was going to be, but with my pop-savvy perspective and objectivity, I just knew.

Hulk hadn’t developed his character back then, and he’d yet to become entirely comfortable on the mic. He was able to talk some, but he was still green, still learning the subtleties of business. He hadn’t really even begun to work the crowd yet, but then again, he didn’t really have to. When the fans saw him they just reacted: he was just so big, and he had that look, all that natural charisma. Sometimes you can watch a



horse out in the field and just know whether or not it can win the Kentucky Derby. I knew Hulk Hogan was definitely a thoroughbred.

By the time I next saw Hulk, he was a star in the AWA, and to some degree in New York. Since 1978 he'd already been appearing for the WWF, and in 1980 he fought (and lost to) Andre the Giant at a big closed circuit TV event broadcast from Shea Stadium; he was then based in Minneapolis. He wasn't, however, a household name — remember, this was well before the WWF went nationwide. I was bringing in that “unstoppable object” every Monday night to keep Jerry Lawler from killing me. One week Lawler says, “Guess who I've got coming in next? Hulk Hogan's going to be here Monday night.”

“Oh, my God!” I said. “That's great!” The house was sold out.

But more important than the night's receipts was the bond that formed between Hulk and me. Before the match, he said, “Look, Jimmy, I'm worried that these guys might try to swerve me.” A swerve is a surprise, trick or reversal that's not part of a match's plan. The local territories were notorious for editing videotape to change the outcome of a match. Usually, when a wrestler's down for a near fall, the count goes: One ... Two ... And then he barely kicks out of the pin before the ref says “Three.” Well, you can take a piece of video and edit and splice it to the point where a near fall looks like a three-count. Back then, Hulk Hogan was already big enough that a clean pinfall victory, even if it occurred on a doctored tape, would have been damaging to his star power. With a growing reputation to protect, Hulk was justifiably worried.

As Hulk's manager that night, I was, of course, supposed to jump into the ring while Lawler had him in a pinning



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predicament. My job was to hit Lawler with my cane, just before the count of “Three,” and save my guy from losing.

Well, in the back before the match Lawler took me aside and said, “Jimmy, look, we want to make sure that Hulk’s shoulders are down for a while. Long enough that if we want to do a little bit of stuff with the tape down the line . . . Well, you know. So don’t come in too fast. Whatever you do, don’t come in too fast.” Lawler wanted to be able to make it look like he had Hulk pinned before I jumped in the ring. Live, everything would end with a DQ — after I entered Lawler would bump me around, and beat up a bit on Hogan, and then the ref would call the whole thing off. There would be no clean victory. On tape, it might be a different story . . .

Anyway, like I said, Hulk suspected some kind of swerve. And just before our match, he looked at me and said, “Jimmy, please. On the count of ‘One,’ make sure your ass is in that ring. Brother, make sure you’re hitting Lawler with that cane.”

I met his gaze and told him I’d be there.

Buddy, when that referee got down for the count I was in like a bullet, whaling Lawler’s ass with that cane. Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Five times. I didn’t even give him the chance to get the near-fall.

It was the best move I ever made.

If Lawler had been able to manufacture a three-count in the editing room, it might have been horrible for Hulk, possibly even changing the course of his career. Certainly, it would have temporarily damaged his reputation and status.

I had a clear choice: I could either do things Lawler’s way or stand with Hulk. And I went with Hulk, not knowing that I’d ever be connected with him, years later, at the end of the



rainbow. After the match Lawler was agitated, going, "Man, you jumped in too fast!" But Hogan was relieved, seeing things much differently, "Fabulous, brother! You were right there, right on the spot." That would be just the first of many moves I'd make in support of Hulk Hogan.

Soon after leaving Memphis, back in Minneapolis, Hulk landed a part in *Rocky III*. Suddenly — once the film is released — everybody knows who he is. Nick Bockwinkel, another one of the guys we brought in to fight Lawler, was still entrenched as the top dog in the AWA, so Hulk accepted an offer from Vince McMahon to move to the WWF full time. It was the beginning of the end for Verne Gagne's territory, just another victim of the New York wrestling juggernaut.

The Hulk era — in effect the beginning of the modern era of professional wrestling — began in January 1984, when Hogan beat another Memphis grad, the Iron Sheik, for the WWF title. He was still the champ when I got to the WWF in March of the following year, and he held the title for another three years, until Andre the Giant finally beat him in 1988.

During my time with the WWF, Hulk was the face, the ultimate good guy. I almost exclusively managed heels, so I couldn't be in his corner — but like everyone else, I still wanted to be in whatever town he was working. In the mid-80s the WWF had three shows running almost every night, and even though we were selling out everywhere, all the guys wanted to work the cards that featured Hulk, for the simple reason that you made more money being with Hulk's show. Back then, few performers had a guaranteed salary. Instead, you received a negotiated share of whatever the house drew. And so the bigger the houses you played to, the more money



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you made for the week. Hulk's houses, naturally, were always the biggest.

Hulk Hogan was an unbelievable phenomenon. Almost single-handedly, he took professional wrestling mainstream: dragging it, from dark, dingy, smoke-filled beerhalls and local gymnasiums, into the light of day and a new level of popularity. He made Hulkamania, wrestling and the WWF, household words. A lot of guys like me have money in the bank because of Hulk Hogan. A lot of guys have homes because of Hulk Hogan. That's how much being on Hulk's shows for two or three years could mean — you could literally be set for life. His influence and drawing power, in fact, went far beyond the close confines of professional wrestling. He was endlessly marketable — and over the years he's selflessly raised tons of money for worthy causes, especially children's charities like the Make a Wish Foundation.

Hulk's popularity was incredible. And though a number of wrestlers have had notable followings over the years, there was never anything like Hulkamania. Its rise was meteoric, and Hogan quickly achieved the kind of status and recognition usually reserved for movie stars and rock icons. Just being a part of it was the experience of a lifetime. Whether it's Japan or Europe or the States, being in the ring with him is the craziest thing you'll ever experience. I never got to see the Beatles perform live, but watching the film of their famous Shea Stadium concert, where you can barely hear them sing over the roar of the crowd, I'm reminded of what it was like working with Hulk. At the height of his WWF popularity, when he got into the ring, ten minutes would often pass before the Hulkamaniacs might become quiet enough for his opponent to



be announced. As he made an entrance the roar of the crowd was deafening; some would climb the barriers to try to get to him, to be able to say they touched their hero. Or worse, to get at you if you were his opponent. Thousands of flashbulbs would fire the minute he appeared — there's almost no way I can describe how awesome, and completely disorienting, it all was.

Because of the storylines I was involved in, I really didn't have a lot of direct one-on-one contact with Hulk during the bulk of my WWF tenure, but I did do one favor for him that I know he remembered later on. It happened when Ric Flair was finally brought into the WWF, and he and Hulk were in the midst of their dream feud and doing sellout business. Bobby "The Brain" Heenan was managing Flair at the time, and for whatever reason, Bobby couldn't go on the road and be there in his corner. Hulk always liked his opponent to have a manager, ringside, because he knew that having the odds stacked against him always built tension and kept a match going. It offered a number of different possibilities — he could Hulk up and deal with his opponent, sure, but there were always other spots he could do with the manager. Anyway, when Hulk approached me and said, "Jimmy, would you do me a favor? Would you work with Ric Flair for a couple weeks at all these shows?" I jumped at the opportunity. I'd have been crazy not to — Hulk was always doing sell-out business, and I'd always loved Ric Flair. Besides, in working with them I'd be performing with two legends. Instantly, I was a part of one of the biggest events in pro-wrestling history. That second little favor helped confirm and consolidate Hulk's trust and confidence.



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After ten years of Hulkamania and the WWF, Hulk wanted to take his career into uncharted territory — Hollywood. And he wanted me to come with him. The first step was to get me to manage him in the WWF, and he came up with the idea that got the whole thing going. Two weeks before Summerslam in 1990, his best friend Brutus “The Barber” Beefcake — Ed Leslie — who had been Hulk’s old tag team partner in the Boulder Brothers, had suffered horrific injuries in a freak accident. While boating on a Florida lake with “Killer B” Brian Blair, the knees of a female friend, who was in mid take-off, at the beginning of a parasail run, struck Brutus in the face. His jaw, nose and other facial bones were shattered. Eight hours of dangerous facial surgery followed, and metal plates and screws were used to reconstruct his face. He almost died. Doctors told him that he’d never wrestle again.

By 1993, however, Brutus was trying to get back into wrestling. Hulk himself had been out for a few months — a “retirement” that was actually a well-deserved vacation — when he came to me and said, “Look Jimmy, how would you like to manage me?”

It was, honestly, the biggest shock of my life — and I just thought he was just talking being in his corner (I had no idea he had even bigger plans). Anyway, it wasn’t long before I was in a meeting with Hulk and Vince McMahon. Vince spelled it out: “Jimmy, you’ve been a great heel manager, but Hulk wants to do something babyface with you. It will affect your character, maybe your whole career. You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

I listened to the rest of their plans and said, “God, I’d love it.”

“The Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase and Irwin R. Shyster were tagging as Money, Inc. at the time — in fact, they were the



champs — and I was their manager. The angle that would eventually have me working side-by-side with the biggest name in professional wrestling, and get his friend Brutus Beefcake back into the ring, involved me “doing the right thing” and turning on my guys — and it was pretty much all Hulk’s idea.

Things got started on a show broadcast by the USA Channel: a match between DiBiase and Brutus was announced. Before the bell even rang, Beefcake appeared, grabbed a mic, and began telling this incredible sob story. It wasn’t a work. Basically every word of it — a rarity for wrestling at the time — came from the heart. His in-ring promo went like this: “I’ve been out of wrestling for a while. My whole life’s been hell. My dad died of cancer. As soon as we put him in the grave, my mother died of cancer. Before I could even wipe away the tears, my wife left me.”

The tough crowd wasn’t buying it. You could hear them murmur “Loser” — but hey, that’s New York for you. Everyone backstage was cringing, and I was thinking “Oh, my God.” But the crowd showed no mercy.

Brutus ignored it, kept on going: “And then, a week after she left, I’m in a hospital bed, with a hundred metal pins and plates in my face, knowing my life’s over. Only one person came to me, only one man came to help. And that man was — Hulk Hogan. I’ll never forget what Hulk did for me. Or what he said. Hulk Hogan told me, ‘Brother, you’ve got to do what you’ve always wanted to do, regardless of what happens in your life. You’ve got to do what you need to do — even if it means putting your life on the line.’ Well, what I’ve got to do is to get back into wrestling. So I’m here tonight to take on one-half of the world tag team champs, ‘The Million Dollar Man.’”



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With that, Ted DiBiase, Irwin R. Shyster and I came out from the back. When we hit the ring the first thing we did was mock him, mercilessly. We all laughed at him: “You three-time loser, you’re a joke! And tonight it will get even worse. You’re going to be a four-time loser after we beat you!”

The match developed and Brutus worked heroically, throwing everything he could at Ted. But no matter what he did he couldn’t win. At the same time, DiBiase tried every trick in the book, but he couldn’t beat Brutus. Finally, Ted’s partner, IRS, had seen enough. He jumped into the ring to help his Money Inc. cohort put a beating on Beefcake. They took turns holding him and knocking the crap out of him. And then they grabbed one of their championship belts. They were, naturally, going to destroy his face, once and for all. That was where I came in.

Before they could administer the *coup de grace*, I ran in and shielded Brutus from their attack. My guys were outraged. They screamed at me, furious: “What are you doing? Jimmy, what’s going on?” But I stayed put, protecting him. Shocked and confused, Money Inc. walked away, still trying to figure out what had happened.

The stunned crowd waited. I grabbed a mic and cut the promo that changed everything for me: “There comes a time in a man’s life, when he’s gotta make changes, when he’s gotta step up and do the right thing. And I realized, after hearing Brutus’ story, after listening to everything he’s been through, and seeing what was about to happen, that there was no need for him to suffer like that. Listen, Ted DeBiase, if you could have beat him one-on-one, well, fine. But two-against-one? And bashing in his face? After what this guy’s been through? Well, I want no part of that. So, let’s just say I had a change of heart!”



And that was it. The following week, on TV, Hulk calls me out: "Jimmy Hart, I want you in this ring, right now!" I did as he asked. Facing him, he said, "What you did last week was unbelievable. You know what, brother? You're a Hulkamaniac now! Mouth of the South, you've done crazy things your whole life. You've done nothing but lie and cheat to win. But what you've shown me, now, I know that things have changed. And brother, I'd like to have you on the team."

From that moment, Hulk and Brutus became the Hulkamaniacs — and Jimmy Hart was their manager. At WrestleMania IX in Las Vegas we fought Money, Inc. for the gold. During the match the referee got knocked out: so I took my jacket off and turned it inside-out. And, wouldn't you know, the inside just happened to be striped, black-and-white, like a referee's shirt. I counted Money, Inc. out, and we "won." Then we all got into the briefcase Shyster always carried — part of Money, Inc.'s gimmick was that it contained all of his and DiBiase's money — and threw cash out into the crowd. Of course, my "decision" as referee was eventually overruled. Things turned out better for Hulk later that night — he was the surprise winner, once again, of the World Championship, when he came out from the back to defeat Yokozuna and close the show.

But the triumph wasn't quite what it should have been. After years of growth and success, professional wrestling went through some trying times — and it was a particularly rocky road for both Hulk and Vince. During the 1980s, wrestlers, like a lot of athletes, began to explore steroids, both as a way to bulk up, and as a means of preventing, or recovering more quickly from, the nagging and serious injuries caused by such



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demanding schedules and brutal work. By 1991 laws were in place that seriously governed their prescription and use. Still, many pro wrestlers found other ways and means to acquire these substances. In 1993 the feds stepped in, thinking pro wrestling might be a softer target than other organized professional sports — they probably figured they could make an example of the industry, and put the fear of God into other athletes and team owners. Lawmakers began to put wrestling, and particularly Vince, under a microscope. The thinking was that they might even be able to seize Titan Sports, the corporation that technically owned and operated the WWF, because the activities they were investigating were technically regulated by the same national laws which prohibited the use and distribution of illegal street drugs. Vince was being threatened with the same laws they use to seize your car if you're a dope dealer. Eventually McMahon was indicted on four counts of conspiracy to distribute steroids.

During this time, Hulk appeared on the Arsenio Hall show and, because he was a big hero to kids, denounced the use of performance enhancing drugs. But at Vince's 1994 trial, with immunity and under oath, he had to testify that he had actually used steroids — as many as 85 percent of all wrestlers had at least tried them in the 1980s — and that he'd even given some to Vince in 1988, during the filming of the movie *No Holds Barred*. But Hulk also testified that he personally stopped using steroids when he and his wife decided to have children.

All of this came to nothing, however; and as it turned out, the trial was a joke. Three of the counts against Vince were dropped, and he was found "Not Guilty" of the fourth. But the



damage was done — the whole thing gave wrestling a lot of bad publicity, and created mistrust, fear and bad blood.

Throughout the investigation, and during the Grand Jury proceedings which took place before the trial, Hulk cut back his wrestling schedule: ultimately, he and Vince began exploring separate paths. At the same time, Hulk came to me and said, “Look Jimmy, how would you like to work for me full time? I’m about to do some promotion for a movie called *Mr. Nanny*. I’m going to have to start traveling and doing some things, and I’d like to have somebody with me to help on the road. I’d like to have you with me.”

I admitted the offer was interesting.

He asked, “What did you make last year?”

I told him.

And then Hulk said, “I will have a cashier’s check at your house tomorrow afternoon, if you’ll agree to do this. Because the truth is, Jimmy, I need you. I’m going to do more movies. I’ll be going overseas to promote this stuff. I’ll be all over the place. I want somebody with me that’s capable of helping to handle business for me, somebody I can really depend on.”

As anybody knows, managing a wrestler inside the ring is nothing like managing the day-to-day affairs of a star entertainer — which is what Hulk was. Still, by that time I had done enough behind the scenes work for the WWF that Hulk thought I could handle the job. As I’ve mentioned, Vince McMahon had always “put me over” — always spoken highly of me — and called me the company’s best employee. Hulk knew and respected that.

I told Hulk, “Gosh, this is great, but let’s talk about it more when you’re really sure of your plans.” And then I really didn’t



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think much more about our conversation until a week later, when the phone rang. It was Hulk, saying, “Jimmy, me and Linda (his wife) would like to come by your house.” A little while later I was inviting them in. We sat down and he said, “Look, I’ve thought of everybody out there I could have working for me — and I really want you with me. The whole time you’ve been in New York you’ve always been dependable, you’ve always worked hard.”

He brought up the time he had asked me to go out and manage Ric Flair, and other things, and then he said, “Jimmy, I need you. I’ve got a cashier’s check in my hand for your whole salary for a year — \$150,000.”

I told him that the amount was fair, but that it really only represented my base salary, because I’d always made a bit more — from the sale of dolls and T-shirts and other merchandise. He said, no problem, we could build it up a little. And then I asked about the bottom line, “Hulk, what if I get seriously ill in a month?”

He said, “The money’s yours.”

“What if I don’t like it?”

“Well, before you leave, smooth things over with Vince. Make sure it’s okay for you to come back. If you don’t like the job, you can go — no hard feelings. Whatever you need — because I need you. I’m gonna do a TV series, too, ‘Thunder in Paradise,’ and I want you with me. I’ll give you a little part in it, and you’ll make residuals off that. Jimmy, take the cashier’s check. Deposit it, and you’re with me, full time.”

So, I talked to Vince. He appreciated my position and wished me well, saying that if I ever wanted to come back, the door was open.



With all the uncertainty in the business, and after all my years in wrestling, Hulk's offer was just too good to turn down. I put the money in the bank. Really, the whole thing tells you a lot about the character of Hulk Hogan: he didn't know if I was gonna get sick, quit or screw up — but he gave me the whole amount up front.

As I said, I left the WWF on good terms — I've learned not to burn any bridges. Hulk lost his title to Yokozuna in June of 1993 and that was it, we were off and running. From then on I was with him all the time, doing whatever he needed to be done. I'd be his go-to guy, making sure everything he needed done was done right. A lot it was promotion and publicity stuff — I'd screen media people, for example, and made sure interviews were completed on schedule. It all began with promotion for the movies *Mr. Nanny* and *Urban Commando*. I was with him all day long, and they were long days — Hogan's a workaholic. The overseas promotion for *Mr. Nanny* was extensive, and even on the road we'd be up at six in the morning, lifting weights. Okay, Hulk was lifting weights. I was on the treadmill, acting like I was really working out with him. After, a limousine would come by and we'd really get going — interview after interview after interview all day long.

During all of this, Hulk carried and worked on a script about an ex-Navy Seal, and eventually he took the project to the people who produced "*Baywatch*." (Coincidentally, there'd been a real-life ex-Navy Seal who'd made it big in wrestling, the movies and politics, someone I'd managed a few times in Memphis — Jesse "The Body" Ventura.) Hulk and the producers eventually turned the script into the TV series "*Thunder in Paradise*," and as Hulk promised, I was given a semi-regular



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part. Once again, the marriage of rock and wrestling that I'd worked so successfully paid dividends: I became Jammin' Jimmy, one of the beach crowd regulars, and appeared in 14 of the show's 22 episodes. Along with Jim McGuire, my song-writing partner from Somerset, Kentucky, I was in many of the beach bar scenes, and I had a few lines here and there. Our characters were musicians, and we played regularly at the Scuttlebutt bar. Our little band — Jammin' Jimmy and Tone Deaf — was always set up in the corner and ready to perform.

Again, this kind of thing goes a long way in explaining the kind of person Hulk is. He always gets his friends involved in what he's doing. Brutus Beefcake appeared in four episodes of "Thunder in Paradise," and when you look at the credits from several other episodes you'll find the names James Henry Neidhart and Steve Borden. Wrestling fans recognized them, of course, as Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart and Sting. Giant Gonzalez also made an appearance.

The TV series was a lot of fun, but it was also very time consuming. For a thirty-second spot you could shoot all day. Things are completely different in professional wrestling, where, generally, what you see is what you get. The cameras are on, you're there. One take and that's it.

Hulk always went out of his way to help everybody he could and lend his name to a worthy cause. No matter how tired he was, he was always visiting children's hospitals, and he was named Man of the Year by the Make a Wish Foundation several years in a row. He never turned down anyone in need; he was always there, 24/7, for everybody.

Like I said, working for Hulk meant I was as busy as he was. Shooting "Thunder in Paradise" we developed a disciplined



schedule. The days again began early, lifting weights, then we were on the set all morning. I was there with him all the time — except when I was filming a scene for the show. But as soon as I was finished, I was back by his side. When anything important came up, like an urgent call from his agent, Peter Young, or his lawyer, Henry Holmes (who also handles George Foreman and Pamela Anderson), I'd be his point man. They'd call to discuss movie scripts, appearances and other business, and I'd pass information on to Hulk or provide them with details. And when they weren't on the phone, I was: checking in regularly to see if they needed anything from Hulk. Seven days a week, I was always on call. My hotel room was next to his, my airline seat, my place in the limo: it was my job to be there whenever I was needed.

I also helped Hulk find his way in a new venture: music. We worked out a record deal with Select Records, and it brought in some big money. So, both on TV and in real life I was back in music — only this time I was working with Hulk Hogan instead of the Gentrys.

"Thunder in Paradise" was a great vehicle for me. Jim McGuire and I wrote eleven or twelve songs that were used in beach and bar scenes. On top of that, we also wrote the closing theme. We had actually written "Thunder in Paradise" to be the opening song, not knowing that the producers had gotten their own people to write something to begin the show. Still, our tune was used for the end credits.

Meeting with the producers of the show led to a guest shot on "Baywatch": I played Ricky Van Shelton's country music manager. Things went so well that they called me back for an episode called "Bash at the Beach" — which, of course, had a



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wrestling theme. Then, the musical work I'd done for "Thunder in Paradise" prompted the producers to ask for a song for still another "Baywatch" episode — it kind of became the theme music for a character called Pelican Man.

Hulk and I toured the world together and became involved in numerous different projects. For two years we were inseparable. Along the way we came to another understanding: if we ever got back into wrestling we'd do that together, too. And that's just what happened.

"Thunder in Paradise" was shot at the Disney studios in Orlando, where, at the time, World Championship Wrestling, Ted Turner's organization, was also taping shows. While we were shooting, Eric Bischoff, who had come in to run WCW, arranged to meet with us. Eric said, "Look, if you guys ever decide to get back into wrestling, I'd love to see it happen in a WCW ring."

Ted Turner's promotion was the new kid on the block, the upstart, challenging Vince McMahon's monolithic WWF. And although Turner's WCW had only technically existed for three years, the roots of the organization that would become the driving force behind the great mat wars of the mid and late '90s stretched back in time to the glory days of the National Wrestling Alliance. The NWA was established in 1948 as a loose organization of most of the territories in the western U.S. By the early 1960s, the NWA promoters were unhappy with Capitol Wrestling, the promotion which controlled wrestling in the northeast, owned and operated by Vince McMahon Sr. (the father of the Vince McMahon we know today) and Toots Mondt. The rivalry came to a head over NWA champion "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers. Rogers was one of Mondt's boys,



and he was rarely allowed to appear in buildings outside of the northeast. Finally, Mondt and McMahon Sr. decided to leave the NWA and take Rogers with them. A world championship title controversy ensued. Then, in 1963, McMahon Sr. and Mondt created a new organization, the World Wide Wrestling Federation.

The WWF (McMahon soon dropped the “Wide” from the name) was just another rival territory until 1983, when Vince Sr. sold controlling interest to his son. Based in New York (Connecticut, actually), Vince Jr. ignored all the territorial divisions and took the WWF nationwide. As we all know, he succeeded, much to the detriment of all the other promotions. By the late 1980s most of old territories had been driven out of business or had folded, knowing the end was near. The old National Wrestling Alliance had withered away, with pretty much only a single territory, run by Jim Crockett out of Charlotte, North Carolina (which, coincidentally, was where Ted Turner’s father had started in the broadcasting business) trying to carry the banner.

In 1991 Turner decided to get into wrestling and go head-to-head against Vince and the WWF: he bought Crockett’s business. Turner’s superstation, WTBS, had been running Georgia Championship Wrestling, the programming of yet another dying territory. It was immediately replaced with NWA-driven stuff, and given the new name, World Championship Wrestling.

Eric Bischoff had been a commentator with Verne Gagne’s Minneapolis-based AWA, and he’d been brought down to work for WCW along with Diamond Dallas Page. Eric had a knack for being in the right place at the right time. And when Turner decided to make a change in the front office of his wrestling business, to really make a run at Vince, Bischoff was put in



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charge. When Hulk and I met with him, Eric had just taken over. He was just beginning to get his mind around taking a regional, southern operation to the national stage. He had Ted Turner's Superstation WTBS, and he already had some great stars — Lex Luger, Sting, the Steiner Brothers and Ric Flair. Still, he had something more important, and as yet untapped, in his arsenal: Ted Turner's checkbook.

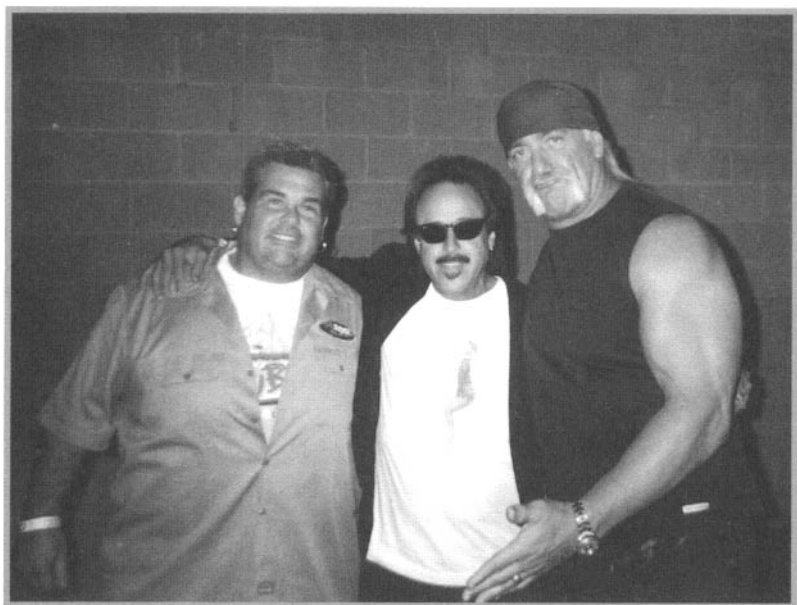
Eric dreamed of challenging New York immediately, believing he could compete on the national stage if he could make one big, decisive, industry-shaking move. He and Ric Flair (who was also a part of WCW's braintrust) decided that move was to sign Hulk Hogan. Hulk had been approached by HBO, with an offer of \$2 million, to start his own company for two Pay-Per-View telecasts, but Eric put a deal on the table that convinced him to come to WCW. Obviously, it was the kind of offer Hulk couldn't refuse.

And that was it — Hulk was going back to wrestling. And so was "The Mouth of the South."



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## Still Rockin', Still Wrasslin'

I had known Ric Flair for years. I'd even managed him in the early days, for one match back in Nashville; it was during one of the most remarkable streaks in wrestling history, when he won the world championship thirteen times. I helped him win by knocking out Randy "Macho Man" Savage with my megaphone. Now we were on opposite sides of the ring — he was fighting Hulk Hogan and I was in Hulk's corner.

Eric Bischoff changed the face of wrestling when he convinced Hogan to return with WCW, and it all began when Hulk landed in Orlando to battle "the dirtiest player in the game," Ric Flair. People had been waiting to see Flair and Hogan — the two biggest moneymakers in the business — really work a well-developed program for years. When they finally went toe-to-toe they headlined what turned out to be one of the biggest



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pay-per-views WCW ever had. And it wasn't just wrestling fans caught up in the fever. Hulk and I had basketball star Shaquille O'Neal in our corner. George Foreman, the heavyweight boxing champ, was there, and so were a lot of other celebrities.

When Hulk took the world title from Flair in July 1994, I was back on the charts with a bullet, rockin' and wrasslin' in WCW. The clash of these two titans put WCW on the map — leveling the playing field with the WWF. Hulk's move to Turner's upstart organization started a chain reaction. A healthy influx of wrestlers made their way south from New York. As I've I said, where Hulk goes, wrestling goes — everybody wants to be on the winning team, and Hogan is a one-man dynasty.

With Hulk as champ and Eric Bischoff in the front office, WCW took off. Eric developed a new kind of wrestling program, calling WCW's flagship "Monday Night Nitro." The debut of the live broadcast was another major turning point. Going head-to-head with the WWF's "Raw," it gave people the opportunity to choose the kind of wrestling they wanted to see, offering a viable alternative to something that had perhaps grown a bit stale. New ideas and a new product appealed to the contemporary wrestling fan, and the "competition" definitely created a buzz. It had been a long time coming — but any real student of pro wrestling itself should have known what the effect was going to be. A champion always needs a credible opponent; a babyface needs a heel nemesis. When the WWF was an industry-wide monopoly, wrestling could only go so far. But with Hulk appearing on "Nitro" something greater was at stake: wrestling supremacy. And that's what drew in the fans — and caused the frenzy of the next few years.



Because the networks didn't invest as much in Monday nights, "Nitro" and "Raw" were well-positioned: there was a huge audience out there, ripe for the picking. Wrestling fans nationwide finally had the chance to see all the sport's superstars. Better still, both organizations went all-out to try to top each other, to beat each other in the ratings. And as everyone quickly realized, the higher the ratings were, the more people wanted to see the matches live. Ultimately, it's like any sport. If you watch football, baseball, basketball or wrestling on TV, then you're going to want to see it in person.

Some might think that the heyday of the Monday night wars made the life of a professional wrestler that much easier. Sure, some guys made a lot of money and became famous. But things were really almost as tough as they were in the old days, when we were driving around the old circuit. To get a big Monday night rating, you had to put all your talent out there — all the time. The schedule was arduous. The live show Monday. A Tuesday night taping. House shows practically every other night. Monthly pay-per-views. Week after week after week, town after town, from one gym to the next, one diner and hotel room to another, it went on and on. In the end we were traveling or working seven days a week: guys burned out, guys got hurt and relationships were stressed to their limits.

That was the frenzied life Hogan and I enjoyed with WCW. Hulk held the title for over a year, defending the strap countless times, until some of my antics, in October 1995, finally caused him to lose the championship. The title went to The Giant (not Andre, who had died by then, but Paul Wight, who is now better known as the WWE's Big Show). Always the opportunist, I also co-managed The Giant during his title run, with Kevin Sullivan,



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but the WCW stripped him of the belt after only nine days — because of the way he'd won. I was his manager again, in April 1996, when he took the title for a second time. And when he lost it to Hulk in August of that year.

That's right: I managed *against* Hulk. I never thought it could happen again — not after spending the better part of two years together — but as any true fan knows, in wrestling anything is possible. During the late '90s, in WCW, especially, what was once unimaginable had a way of playing out in the squared circle.

Pro wrestling as the world knew it changed when Hulk Hogan — the biggest draw in the history of the business, and the most popular babyface of all time, a career good guy — ran into the ring in Daytona Beach. The New World Order of Scott Hall and Kevin Nash (Razor Ramon and Diesel back in their WWF days) had been terrorizing WCW with ruthless outlaw violence. And before “Bash at the Beach” things were escalating: it was rumored that a new member of the nWo would be unveiled. And then it happened — Sting and Lex Luger were already out of the mix, Hall and Nash had Randy Savage at their mercy in the ring and they were destroying him. The crowd roared as Hulk came down to make the save. There it was! The patented legdrop! Only it wasn't the two bad guys who felt his wrath. No, it was his former “friend,” the Macho Man. Hulk Hogan had turned heel, become “Hollywood,” and joined the nWo. Later, when Hogan spray-painted the infamous “nWo” logo over the title belt after winning it back from The Giant, he officially became the most hated man in professional wrestling.

Hulk and I are still great friends, of course. When he had arthroscopic knee surgery in 1999, he asked me to go with him to Birmingham. I flew in on his private jet, stayed with



him after the operation, waited with him until he was ready to leave, and then made sure he boarded the plane and got home all right. When A&E did their “Biography” special on Hulk, they came to me for an interview and for tapes of his matches. And when WCW needed to create some heat for a match between Hulk and Lex Luger, I stood in the middle of the ring, alone, and talked to crowd as Hulk’s friend. I paid dearly for it, too. Luger put me in his Torture Rack and spraypainted my back. Even though we weren’t officially paired up, in a sense, I was still working for Hulk: I wasn’t on his payroll, but I was glad to do it.

The New World Order was an incredibly wild phenomenon, and it brought fans to the WCW like never before. Who would have thought there could be an outlaw organization within wrestling? Pretty quickly, WCW became the hottest ticket in town. Ratings went through the roof — and for the first time in years McMahon’s empire was on the ropes. Week after week, WCW upped the ante and beat the WWF in the ratings. The nWo split into two factions. Sub-groups formed. The “Nitro” dancers were a hot item for a while, and eventually some of them got involved in the matches. One day you turned on the TV and masked Mexican wrestlers, *luchadores*, were flying all over the ring. At one point Eric Bischoff even tried to goad Vince McMahon into a fight. Ultimately, things spiraled out of control. It became impossible to keep doing the “impossible.” McMahon and the WWF managed to make new stars with their “Attitude,” adapting to WCW’s assault and becoming a stronger organization in the process.

By October 1999 WCW had derailed. Bischoff spent a lot of money on rock bands and other non-wrestling talent to try to



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boost ratings, and it hadn't paid off. He was replaced by Vince Russo and Ed Ferrara, who had been writers for the WWF. Russo's background was in radio, but Ferrara had actually wrestled, and had worked as a Hollywood scriptwriter before landing at the WWF. Now, actually bringing in scriptwriters was one thing, but telling the media and the fans that you were bringing in scriptwriters to help with ratings was something I never thought I'd see in professional wrestling. For as long as I'd been around, that part of the game, at least, had been "kayfabe." When a wrestler said "kayfabe" in the presence of other insiders, it meant that meant someone was hanging around who wasn't in the business. The term is best described as the way we acknowledge wrestling's code of silence and secrecy.

Kayfabe was threatened, of course, when Vince McMahon admitted to the New Jersey sports authority that wrestling was "sports entertainment." But Vince had to do it; if he hadn't, professional wrestling matches in New Jersey would have been seriously compromised by the regulations of the state boxing commission. It was big news within the industry and among hardcore fans, but then people pretty much forgot about it. A more serious blow to kayfabe occurred when Russo and Ferrara went on the Internet and spoke candidly about writing storylines. The death blow came when Buff Bagwell, on "Nitro," stood in the middle of the ring and said he wasn't going to take any more from "the guys in the back who write this crap."

This, as it turned out, was one of Russo's new angles. The scriptwriters, who called themselves "The Powers That Be," along with a couple of goons called Creative Control (the Harris twins), started feuding with wrestlers who refused to follow their scripts. Eventually, Russo himself got in the ring.



My opinion? Being from the old school, I really believe that the less you tell people, the better off you are. It's like going to a movie. You know that nobody's really being killed, that the building's really not on fire, right? But you don't want somebody getting up in front of you before the show, saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, what you're about to see is fiction. Bruce Willis is not really going to be shot. The actors are not really going to be harmed. No one, in making this film, was exposed to any true danger . . ." And then you certainly don't want that person, every time, demonstrating how things work behind the scenes. This kind of thing destroys the magic, takes away from the imaginative experience. Wrestling should work this way, too.

Not long after some of wrestling's "secrets" were exposed, the same thing happened within the world of magicians, and it's cut back their business by thirty or forty percent: that's what happens when people discover the "truth" behind mysteries that have entertained them for years. Personally, as far as wrestling goes, I don't think it matters what the fans "believe" about the sport. When people ask, "Jimmy, is wrestling real?" I always answer the same way: "For those who believe, no explanation is necessary. And for those who don't believe, no explanation will do."

Revelations about what goes on behind the scenes are everywhere today: on the Internet dozens of wrestling websites scoop storylines, publish spoilers and talk openly about the business of wrestling — everything, from attendance figures and pay-per-view buyrates, to details of contract negotiations and gossip about who really has "heat" with who, is just a click away. But that's not the only thing that's changed. The reality of



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wrestling schedules today means that the “fraternity” isn’t as strong — wrestlers aren’t really as close as they were years ago, when they all had to make 300-400 mile daily trips together. Back then, even the big stars shared the same routine. Three or four to a car, a regular weekly tour, with regular restaurants, and hotels: the same guys on the road together, sharing the same routine. Now guys make their own way. They fly in or drive a rental directly to the building. Most of the wrestlers work out, do the show, and go back to their room or go to a bar or whatever — or they immediately hit the road, trying to find a few hours with their family, or simply to get to the next show.

Back in the days of the territories, a guy’s reputation preceded him. If you were the kind of worker who was on time and dependable and did everything the booker asked, everybody in the business knew and respected you. So, if you wanted to work Florida or Minnesota, the grapevine had already told the promoters all about you. Working for Vince McMahon, things were the same. If you worked hard, Vince was always more than fair, always in your corner. He treats a man with the respect he deserves, and if you’re one of his guys he’ll do anything in the world for you.

Years ago, you paid your dues. If you caused problems, if you were late all the time or didn’t want to do what the promoter asked, it didn’t take long for word to spread. Guys with bad reputations found that work would soon dry up. Nobody in the country would touch you. Nowadays, many wrestlers have guaranteed contracts. When they’re late or uncooperative there’s really very little a company can do to punish them.

One thing that hasn’t changed, fortunately, is the effect a wrestler with great talent or charisma can have on the business.



In WCW, we saw that with Goldberg. Bill Goldberg played football player at the University of Georgia, and made it to the NFL with the Atlanta Falcons. He had a great look, and he was full of intensity and “attitude” — the same kind of thing that had made “Stone Cold” Steve Austin the biggest star in the WWE. WCW got behind Goldberg right away. People love a winner, especially one who looks good and can walk the walk and talk the talk. Goldberg was the complete package: a new star fans could really believe in. He won a hundred-and-something straight matches; and then he finally won the championship belt, before a hometown crowd in Atlanta’s Georgia Dome, by beating Hulk Hogan.

After an injury, and after spending his entire run in the business as a babyface, Goldberg returned as a heel. I wasn’t part of the decision-making process, but I really think that was another big mistake for WCW — he still had a lot of mileage left, doing just what he’d been doing. In wrestling, fans let you know pretty quick when something’s not working. Put ten T-shirts for each wrestler on a table in every city you visit for a month: at the end of that time, count the sales. Wrestling crowds vote with their cash — and that’s the best gauge of who’s really over. When Hulk and I noticed that people were starting to boo us, we knew it was probably time for him to finally turn heel. And when his nWo run played out, we also knew when it was time to break out his old colors, the red and yellow: the fans had been without the Hulkster for long enough — of course, he got a huge pop.

I know what it sounds like, but you have to understand, I’m really not second-guessing storylines — bookers don’t have an easy job. You don’t just pull out a pen and some paper and say,



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“Let’s make these matches.” And it’s not just a case of sending any two guys out there: things rarely work exactly as you’ve planned. I booked matches for WCW’s Saturday night shows, programs specifically designed to groom and push new talent. Just about everybody I worked with made their way onto “Nitro,” kids like Lance Storm, Mark Jindrak, Chuck Palumbo, as well as Kid Romeo, the Young Dragons (Kaz Hayshi, Jimmy Yang and Jamie Knoble), and Three Count (Evan Karagias, Shannon Moore and Shane Helms). But it wasn’t easy. Factors beyond your control are always playing havoc with long-term plans. One guy has a family crisis, and he’s out for a big match. Another gets injured, and suddenly everything you were going to do with a character for the next two months has to be scrapped. Sometimes a booker needs to be a juggler — or Houdini — to keep the fans, and the wrestlers — happy.

One thing people noticed as WCW began to decline — and they still ask me about it all the time — was that they weren’t seeing as much of “The Mouth of the South” on TV. Was Jimmy Hart slowing down? Taking it easy? Being eased out of the picture as professional wrestling moves on?

Well, the truth is, I was working harder than ever. It’s just that more of my work took place “behind the curtain,” as we used to say when the dressing rooms were literally behind a piece of cloth. One reason I stopped being out at ringside every week is that I’ve done just about everything there is to do in professional wrestling. I’ve managed Hulk Hogan and Bret Hart, The Honky Tonk Man, Lex Luger, Randy Savage, and the Giant. I’ve been hung 50 feet above the mat in steel cages. I’ve been hauled across coliseum floors in harness matches. I’ve been in handicap matches, dog food matches, ladder matches,



scaffold matches, tar-and-feather matches, chicken suit matches — you name it, I've done it all.

And even if you're not a wrestling fan, you can still find me all over the media. On Comedy networks with the great Andy Kaufman. In the movie *Bikini World*. On old clips from "Hullabaloo," "Shindig" and "Where the Action Is." My music is heard all over the world wherever they play "Keep on Dancing." But I'll tell you something about the spotlight. It's like eating steak every day — when you do, it's nothing special. If you're on TV every day, everywhere, well, sometimes people get tired of seeing you. In the world of wrestling, especially, sometimes you have absence make the heart grown fonder.

And then there's the bodily abuse. Wrestling is more physically demanding than ever before. Guys like Ted DiBiase and Arn Anderson have had to make the choice between retirement or possible paralysis because their vertebrae couldn't hold up. I've been in the business for three decades, and I can really feel it the morning after a match. My knees hurt. My elbow hurts. When it's cold, the right side of my jaw still aches. (Thanks, King.) A couple of years ago I fractured my elbow. Kevin Sullivan, one of the most dangerous men in professional wrestling, was fighting Chris Benoit in Baltimore when he decided to throw the big iron steps that lead into the ring at me. Now, I pride myself in being the quickest guy in professional wrestling, but as the years go by you lose a few steps . . . I just didn't get out of the way fast enough. My elbow still looks like Jay Leno's chin.

My most awful injury occurred in April of 2000, and it was caused by a guy who's a worse wrestler than me, if that's possible. It happened in Chicago, at WCW's Spring Stampede



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Pay-Per-View. Most of the matches that night were part of an elimination tournament for the heavyweight championship. Eric Bischoff, who was back with WCW for a second stint, and Vince Russo made everybody turn in their title belts and compete in an elimination tournament. The winner of the tournament would then fight Jeff Jarrett for the title. But the *feature match* of the evening — at least that's what Mean Gene Okerlund called it in his pre-match announcements — was between Jimmy Hart and a guy named Erik Muller.

Of course, nobody knows who Erik Muller is, but the people of Chicago recognize his voice, instantly. To them, he's Mancow, one of the area's top "shock jock" radio personalities.

It all started on "The Jenny Jones Show." She had me, Buff Bagwell, Perry Saturn, Disco Inferno and Scottie Riggs on to talk about professional wrestling in general — about how people get into it. Mancow was also a guest, and he had been looking forward to meeting me because he was a big fan of Andy Kaufman. Well, I must have made a better impression on him than the other guys, because he called me the next day and said, "Jimmy Hart, you are for real. I love you to death. If there's anything I can ever do for you, please let me know. Out of everybody there, you were the best. And, meeting somebody who's been around as long as you have, who's done what you've done, well, I wasn't disappointed."

I kept in touch with Mancow, doing radio interviews, off and on, over the next five or six months. When Hulk and Sid Vicious were scheduled to fight at the Spring Stampede (the elimination tournament was a last minute replacement for the show's main event, because Sid tore his rotator cuff), Hulk and I went down to Mancow's station a month early to do some



promotion. At one point Mancow looked at me and said, "You know Jimmy, I saw the last 'Nitro,' and what I wanna know is this. If you're the greatest manager in the world, how can you turn your back on Hulk Hogan? How can you let him get suckered by Sid Vicious? How can he go to the ring to be Hulk's partner, and then turn on the Hulkster and put him through a table?"

Well, "The Mouth of the South" answered: "Let me tell you something, Einstein. You get up every morning, and you come down here to this little four- or five-hour job. And you've got four or five guys with you. You've got your little 1001 Jokes book and your only job is to try to make the people of Chicago laugh. You've never been up and down the road like Jimmy Hart. You've never been four-to-a-car like we were back in the early days. You weren't in the ring with Andy Kaufman. You haven't managed legends like the Hart Foundation or the Funks. Who in the heck do you think you are?"

So, we got into our little on-air scrap. It wasn't long before Mancow was challenging me to a match. A month later we were in the ring. I was wearing a Howard Stern T-shirt, and telling anyone who'd listen that Mancow was a Stern wannabe — and in my corner I had a wrestler named Hail. Mancow had his whole entourage, including a guy named Turd, with him.

During the match I, of all people, came off the top rope. I was aiming for Mancow, of course, but I took out the referee. As I stumbled around, Mancow tackled me. But instead of hitting me head-on, he came at me sideways. I found out later that he cracked my kneecap and stretched the ligaments in my left knee. But I finished the match. Hail came in and threw the DJ into his entourage. But while I was trying to wake up the ref, Mancow recovered. He grabbed a chair — and that was it



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for me. Hulk Hogan couldn't stop me. Jerry Lawler couldn't stop me. Who stops me? Maaaaancow!

Eventually, I found myself spending as much time promoting as I spent in the ring. Once again, things had come full circle: I loved it then and I love it now. I was on the road just as much, but I'd find myself in town a few days or weeks ahead of a big show, doing appearances to promote the matches. And then I'd work in the office or backstage at the matches to help keep everything organized.

I continued doing music, too — specifically, lots of entrance themes. I like to get the wrestlers involved in their music. They give me an idea for a feel by telling me what groups they like, or what type of beat they think suits their character, and then my partner J.J. McGuire and I take things from there. Our music introduced Disco Inferno, Randy Savage, Hulk, Sting, the Ultimate Warrior, Perry Saturn, Buff Bagwell, Billy Kidman, Chris Benoit, the Four Horsemen, Diamond Dallas Page and the West Texas Rednecks. We also wrote a lot of stuff for the “Nitro” girls.

We even wrote the late “Mr. Perfect” Curt Hennig's big songs, “I Hate Rap” and “Good Ole Boys.” Curt wasn't the greatest singer in the world, but people loved it. It just goes to show you: if you've got a hook, and lyrics folks can sing, almost anyone can have a hit. We had a thousand people show up in Nashville, with only one day's notice, to watch us shoot the video for “I Hate Rap.”

With a new generation of wrestlers taking over, it's probably wise for “The Mouth of the South” to begin to step out of the way. But every now and then I'll still put on my manager's gear and take a few bumps for old times sake — just to show all



those up-and-comers just how valuable a manager can be, and to remind everyone of what Jackie Fargo told me as he was stretching me beyond recognition: age and experience shall always overcome youth and enthusiasm.